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Adult literacy biographies: trajectories for changing lives

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1. THE RECOGNITION, VALIDATION AND CERTIFICATION OF COMPETENCIES: A LITERACY CONTEXT

In the last decade, policy discourses produced by the European Union (EU) and the Portuguese Government department in charge of developing policy in adult education and training, made a strong call for the building of a knowledge-based society and an information-based society. This call included aims concerning, among others, the rise of productivity and the improvement of people's employability. In this sense, the low level of school certification and low levels of professional qualification of the Portuguese population were considered to be constraints on economic development.

After 2005, this policy started to include a new strategy to give adults access to education. The aim was to certify almost 10% of the Portuguese population with a) a school education diploma (basic education or secondary education diploma); and b) a professional qualification (levels I, II and III according to EU orientations). This Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) aimed at "formally recognizing skills developed by adults throughout life (in professional, social, family, etc. contexts) and making these skills equivalent to school qualifications, using the same certification levels given by the formal education system, at the basic education and secondary education levels" (Freire, 2009: 20).

Giving special emphasis to knowledge acquired throughout life by experience in various domains (personal, professional and social, among others), the RVCC is mainly a means of recognizing prior learning. According to this perspective, in formal terms, the process has the same value as school education. Additionally, even if residually, RVCC is a process for developing learning and competences in what concerns literacy. In fact, in order to have their competences recognized and certified, adults are required to analyse their competences and knowledge, the processes involved in their development and acquisition, and identify steps for their reconfiguration.

All this is achieved through literacy practices: oral or written life stories, portfolios, language and communication tasks. It is in this sense that it is possible to say that reading and writing practices have here a dual status: an end and a means. This particular status gives origin to tensions (Castro & Laranjeira, 2009). In addition, problems arise because of the difficulties of articulating the vernacular literacies that the adults have already acquired and developed in their life trajectories, with the more formal and institutional practices that define, even tacitly, what is legitimate to say and do with texts, about texts and through texts.

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2. LIFE TRAJECTORIES

The data used in this text have been collected with the aim of discussing the complexity, hybridism and changing nature of adults' literate identities in their way back to school. This data collection forms an exploratory phase of a wider research project about changes in the literate identities of adults who enrolled in these new education and training processes either because they were required to, or of their own free will.

In this phase, the sample consists of 51 adults, studied at the moment that they were starting the process of RVCC who showed interest in cooperating with the research.

By means of 33 questions structured around two main time frames – their school days and the time since leaving school– adults were asked about some aspects of their literacy practices. It was intended to characterise previous and current life trajectories, and to identify beliefs and values associated with their use of texts and their role in personal and social life. Thus, we expected to learn what the individuals do with texts in their daily lives, demystifying, somehow, the idea that the level of formal education determines the degree of literacy. Field notes were also taken when collecting data through the questionnaire.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the sample was randomly constituted, and therefore the only criterion was that subjects should be starting the diagnosis phase for entry into the RVCC. As a result, the adults in this study do not come from a particular age group. The majority are between 33 and 51 years old. For the same reason, only by coincidence is the distribution by gender balanced: 26 men and 25 women. The vast majority, about 70%, is currently unemployed, and the remaining 14, although active, hold unskilled and poorly paid jobs: carpenters, mason's helpers, seamstresses, blacksmiths, cleaners and textile workers. These professional occupations are explained naturally by the low educational qualifications that these adults possess that justify their presence in the school or training centre.

With regard to education and school attendance, the distribution of individuals shows that the vast majority, 26 out of 51 adults, attended and/or completed the 6th grade; the 2nd grade was the lowest level ever attended and the 9th the highest. Still, only 7 of these 26 individuals completed the 2nd cycle of basic education in six years; 16 of the adults needed one to four years to complete the 6th grade. This proves, therefore, that the educational background of respondents was, in fact, characterized by academic failure, with roots in a hypothetical discontinuity and tension between the school Discourse and personal Discourses (Gee, 2005).

A common feature to all respondents, with profound consequences on their life trajectories, is the decision to abandon school and the educational system at a very early stage of their lives. This decision above all appears to be based on factors such as the structural conditions of society, the socio-economic conditions of families, unsuccessful experiences at school (Avila, 2008), among others. According to the answers, it was the desire or need to go to work (41%) that took respondents out of the education system, followed by economic difficulties (31.4%) and by the consideration that they were “not made” for the studies (27.5%).

2.1. PERSONAL WORLDS OF LITERACY

The social perspectives of literacy, refusing to understand reading and writing exclusively as psycho-cognitive skills, conceive the uses of texts as human activities, of a social nature, structuring the interactions between individuals of a community (Barton 1994, Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

The first thing we note when analysing the data is that the daily life of these men and women is marked by the written word. However, reading appears as a more widespread individual and social practice than writing. In the answers given by adults, reading emerges almost exclusively to be at the service of personal communication.

Be it for personal organization, for information or for pleasure, life is crossed by the reading of texts such as: bills, receipts, cooking recipes, notes, letters, brochures, advertising, medicine boxes, product labels, newspapers, magazines, television subtitles. Outside this regularity are the books that 37.2% of these adults still say they read 'sometimes' and 'often'.

In these self-portraits, as seen in the life trajectories from school days to the present, we verify an increase in literacy events, spreading, over time, into more and more varied fields. During the remembered school time, at the centre of those events were books, newspapers and magazines, for recreational purposes. Reading for pleasure (in distinction from reading for homework) is indicated by more than 60% of subjects.

In contrast with these practices of school time, today the vernacular practices predominate - in the sense that, generated on a daily basis, they are not constrained by formal rules and procedures of the dominant social institutions (Barton, 1994). And surely it is this private nature, domestic and familiar, that make adults not always able (or not willing) to identify and visualize. Not recognizing their practice of using texts as legitimate practices, they even claim, when answering the questionnaire: "I do not read anything", "For me to read are those people who read books like reams" (in Notes field).

Perhaps for this reason, in spite of the few missing cases regarding the choice of textual genres in their daily lives, when it comes to naming what they actually read and write in two days of the previous week, about 22% do not answer.

It is obvious that for these adults, the dominant practices of literacy are characterized on the one hand, by reading books and on the other hand, by correct spelling ("My questionnaire is full of mistakes. Please do not mind" - in Notes field). This representation certainly forged in school time and in the dominant discourses that reproduce it, is close to the view that also predominates in this new educational context. Here too, reading books and correct writing seems to be the valued literate identity: "Only with reading they can learn to write," was often heard in the interviews with the leaders of the Centers.

But this feeling of *deficit* in relation to their legitimate practices that they reveal while talking to the researcher, seems likely to be hidden in other responses of the questionnaire. Specifically, when asked whether they have difficulty when they read, 55% say they do not. Similarly, when asked to evaluate their skills in reading and writing, only 13.3% say that they are insufficient; the majority says that they are sufficient and even fully sufficient.

When these responses are cross referenced with the answers about difficulties in reading specific texts, we see some contradiction: except in the case of newspapers, magazines and subtitles, it is always more than 50% those who say they often have difficulties.

Faced with a conflict between what they think they are as literate persons and what they think they should be, which involves fully authoring their biographies, in the words of these 51 persons we may feel the need for some adjustments to the context in which they need to be successful. First of all, despite claiming not to have reading difficulties, 87% say that if they had more reading skills they would understand better. Then, when, in the context of the readings they reported, mostly instrumental and therefore ephemeral, 33 adults (64.7%) in the sample state that “Reading is an act that like to do and love to do in any circumstance.” However, when confronted with a question about the activities with which they occupy their free time, reading is marked as not frequent by 43% of respondents, and 23.5% of them not even include this activity.

With this same value of “adequate statement” about the identifying characteristics of “insiders” (Gee, 2005) of these educational communities – who goes to school likes (and has to like) to read; who is “certified” has to value reading – are the unanimous positions of agreement of these adults regarding the value of reading and writing in their everyday life, and regarding the relevance of these same practices for a full community participation. Reading and writing receives almost unanimous agreement positions and totally agree.

3. CONCLUSION

Each individual is a particular combination of practices and identities resulting from various processes of socialization throughout life. It is through involvement in various social practices of the various domains of life, that subjects acquire skills and processes for handling the written word, but also values, beliefs, knowledge and attitudes about what can be said and done, how and with which ‘accessories’ in a given context.

From the point of view of the impact of the RVCC in the life of these citizens, the answers to the questionnaire are already clear evidence of some lessons learned: from the different social meanings that reading practices have, and hence the conflict between what the researcher asked them and the context in which they were asked, up to the strategies for looking like a reader, namely indicating the titles of books that they are reading.

Because this does not exactly correspond to their real practices, as we concluded with the analysis, it might be said that the answers obtained in this first phase of the research, are a kind of a simulation strategy of an image of reader or, as Aliagas, Castello and Cassany (2009: 109) state “mitigation formulas aimed at changing the perceptions of others about your identity as a reader.”

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