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# **Positioning and Conceptualizing Adult Education and Learning within Local Development**

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## Adult Educators in Portugal: Which Role Have They Been Playing?

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### Summary

Our paper is based on a present ongoing research developed in a Master degree program, a case study with an interpretative approach, which is mainly motivated by two questions and was born on a self critical reflection about the daily working context of one of the authors of this paper, which is a 'professional of recognition, validation and certification' since the last four years.

The general goal of this research stands in questioning the actual professional's performances by reference with the critical framework and principles of the international adult education movement. By doing this we intend to identify the principal issues, problems and potentialities in their educational action, as well as to contribute for a public discussion about these practices. Finally we do want to suggest the need of creating a new career regulation (statute), and the basis for an ethical and deontological professional code on the sector.

### Introduction

The Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences system had given the possibility until now to a large percentage of Portuguese population to increase their school levels, which were dramatically low. However, Nóvoa (2007) alerts:

The recognition of prior learning only make any sense if is under the self formation logic. It's not about of recognizing one's experience to decrease sub-certification or to give a diploma but to understand how experience can be a sustainable way of self-development (p.7).

But sometimes, we have to go back and find through past where do we come from, where are we now and perhaps where do we go from here. According to Finger (2008), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) considered, historically, the adult education as a movement born from an idea of a social change and humanization of civilization (p.22).

Those ideas have, obviously, antecedents and it was mostly connected with increase world industrialization, at the end of 21<sup>st</sup> century, beginning of 20<sup>nd</sup> century. Back there, it was urgent that workmanship were specialized, in order to face so many opportunities of work in big industries. This means, that transformation would come by training the workmanship but also the creation of public school would increase the becoming changes (Silva 1993, cited in Canário, 1999, pp.11-16).

The first education systems were focused to work on a literacy level, basically in three fundamental aspects. In first place, to alphabetize the illiterate people, this was a way to legitimate the bourgeoisie's power, by giving people the right to vote and, finally, a third aspect related to professional training, directly connected to professions and trades. Although the increase of literacy levels was an important task, it wasn't enough, because these intentions to fulfill educational needs of the individuals, the cultural aspects were not considered.

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As UNESCO's basic idea was to promote science and technology in a world wide scale, unifying them but supported by the permanent education's humanizing function, Finger (2008), summarizes that for UNESCO, adult education is considered as a social movement: a permanent education should be done for the development of society, in a way that both technical progress and culture benefits all human beings (p.18).

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the education system, was characterized by using a general school referent which was either for children and/or for adult people be educated. This reality has known a new direction from the 70's, with the intervention of UNESCO, OCDE or the Club of Rome, through some well known reports as *An Introduction to Lifelong Learning*, 1970 or *Faure's Report Learning to be*, 1972, for example. These contributions had showed that school was no longer the referent but life itself, social needs and learning were the new direction (Fernández, 2008). The principal actor was no longer the teacher alone with all the knowledge but also the apprentice who wants to learn and had learned through his life and who can also teach something to someone.

If we attend to use the three different educative models, proposed by Fernández (2008), developed based in the educational work done during the 20<sup>th</sup> century context, this author presents first the Receptive Literacy Model, than the Dialogic Social Model and the Productive Economic Model.

The work developed by the "professionals of recognition, validation and certification" is not at a literacy level so, we will look closer the other two models in order to identify which one is closer to what this professionals are doing at the moment.

In the author's own words, the Dialogic Social Model is based, fundamentally, on the learning of competences which facilitates interaction, in a reflexive and imaginative way, on people's lives and in society. Therefore, this model gives priority to critical consciousness, to thought, to participation and social management. The referent used in this model is not only about the literacy competences (reading and writing) but this competences gives the possibility to adults read the world from a different perspective by doing different readings. It also gives significance to the social competences which allow people to interact with each other and face/solve so many situations in people's lives.

In this model, the adult educator profile is closer to an animator, somebody who is accessible to learning potentialities of adult people. The aim of the learning is strictly social and so indirectly academic. The learning of adults is a continuum which begins in social relationships and not the academic relationships and it will move forward through life in all his features. So, here the adult educator work consists in recognize, conduct and encourage that continuum.

The third model, the Productive Economic Model, focus its intention on teaching competences specially related to the active population and it's participation on the productive sector. Training has been done in many countries under the paradigm of the productive requirement and the search for new professional competences. In this model, the adult educator role is a human resource manager, who selects what adults should learn according to profitability. The goal of the learning is first of all economic and indirectly social. Clearly, this is the dominant model. The

European documents of lifelong learning are deeply impregnated of mercantilist codes, competitive and productive goals (Fernández, 2008, pp. 73-76).

According to the author, in this century, there's a great demand for learning with a significant meaning by adults and, therefore, different educative models are fulfilling it, which has been true until last November, at least in Portugal. A recent political measure in Portugal makes us partly disagree with Fernández. Nowadays, unemployed adult and young people are forced to attend all the educative and formative offers. The Portuguese Institute of the Employment and Professional Training together with the National Agency for Qualification had signed an agreement and delivered a Procedure Note<sup>1</sup> to all the New Opportunity Centers where the message is clear. People are sent to the centers to increase their qualifications and be more prepared, in the future, to find a job or to return to labor market. And if people refuses, the message is also very clear, people will lose any benefits they have, in order to face that period of time when they have no way to provide basic needs.

This entire political agenda has clearly transformed the Prior Learning Recognition System (PLRS) in a central instrument of the New Opportunities Initiative (NOI), which we propose can be interpreted as a way to control people and to show fake results and illusionary statistics on education system.

This is even more visible when adult people have to do exactly in a previous number of sessions, the construction of the Portfolio but in an assisted way, which means that adult educators are there to tell them how to build it. By doing that, the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) process is being done in a closed way, without space for creativity and reflexive work. On the other hand, this way of work with adult people will continue to promote dependence of someone to tell them what they have to do. This is very disturbing and contradictory if we attend to the tradition present on the international adult education movement. By the characteristics of the PLR principles, the adults who attend these processes should have enough experience of life and at least some autonomy to do the process, with these items, adult educators could or should be promoting on them more autonomy and a large critical sense to read the world (Freire, 1987).

The concept of Lifelong Learning (LLL) is interpreted by Griffin (1999b) cited in Lima (2007), like a sort of delegation of competences by the State to the individual, in a matter which is a responsibility of its own, which is the educational public offer plus the creation of educational policies, but from a political and economical point of view, they are guided by the neoliberal paradigm, putting all the forwards and efforts accomplished by ground, and that compromises the future of education and of societies (Lima, 2007, p. 19).

This means that the access, possibility and right to education are seriously compromised by making not important the knowledge and experience of people's lives. As if the most important is what we can teach them under a specific aim; to endow people with "competences", mainly instrumentals and individuals in order to construct a Portfolio and be certificated based on it.

With that being said, it's clear that the adult must be trained, in our opinion, "domesticated" by the adult educators employed by the system, to work and be productive, meaning mostly, in this increasing unemployment scenario, being able to work and being able to product. All of this, in a society of consumption, exacerbated by the world of economics and finance.

The right to express and demand critically rights loses meaning in a world where, more and more, we are surrounded by duties to learn what employers previously define. This type of practices, quickly, leads people involved to become automatons, to adopt an apathy behavior, and if we add at this combination the tiredness and the basic need in people's day-to-day life, this could dismiss all the educational actors of self-esteem, of personal valorization, of self accomplishment and of social recognition, important as food for human survival.

Taking the international scene, the International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA 5) Report refers (point two) the vital importance of adult education on equity and in citizens lives, pointing it as the key for the 21<sup>st</sup>, therefore adult education is still considered a right, which assumes a strong bet on humanist and social character. However between CONFINTEA 5 and 6, we see a progressive but firm establishment of the professional and vocational agenda.

The International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA 6) took place in December 2009 in Belém do Pará (Brasil) with the purpose to evaluate the evolution of education and adults learning, since the CONFINTEA 5 (1997).

From this conference has resulted a new document for our times: Quadro de Ação de Belém. This was adopted by all the 156 Member States of UNESCO, by the social society organizations represented, by social partners, by the United Nations agencies, by the intergovernmental agencies and by the private sector, with the purpose of re-guide actions towards take more advantage of the power and the potential of education and of the adult learning for a executable future (CONFINTEA 6, 2009, p. 6).

Licínio Lima (2010) refers to the recent international political agenda trends (between CONFINTEA 5 (1997) and CONFINTEA 6 (2009) as an exaggerated compliment for what have been expected of lifelong Learning. In his opinion, adult education and lifelong learning have not been guided by a democratic, critical and humanistic conception, but by a functionalist and adaptative reasoning, according to the neo-liberal policies interests. By saying that, Lima (2010) declares:

By searching perfect adaptation to social structures, to economic competitiveness and to the search for employment, the public policies under the lifelong learning operate a radical transition of the concept of education to the concept of learning, giving it a selfishness and pragmatic profound connotation (p. 30).

Since 2001, in Portugal, the RVCC System had suffered several political and normative alterations which translate also the changes of paradigms according to the international political agenda. In our opinion and of course we know that Portugal cannot be apart from international context, but we think that it should have a sincere commitment to what education's concern, to look at education in a more humanistic way and not only this continuous promotion of discourses that designates people as human resources. Also the fast production of school certificates in RVCC system in order to achieve the huge adult education national goals should be re conducted to a mission closer to a public service that promotes social changes in a more engaged way to democratizes the actual democracy we are living in (Barros, 2011). It's obvious that we agree with Nóvoa (2007) when he says that in Lifelong learning discourse, there's a clear proximity to professional training and more individualist.

## conclusion

seems to us that the new adult educators in Portugal, according to Carneiro (2010), we are now one thousand technicians in Portugal, (data from the New Opportunity Initiative External valuation Report<sup>ii</sup>) must have a word to say in what they are doing, but mostly they should have the responsibility to analyze, to think about, to discuss and to act, in a more profound and critical way, what they have been doing and if they want to continue in this direction.

1 Algarve, (there are nineteen New Opportunity Centers (CNO) and their technicians, seventy three “professionals of recognition, validation and certification” plus other members of each CNO) have showed willing to have a meeting to analyze the possibility to create an organization to represent and to analyze their practices in the field as well to stand for the rights. It's ironic how thousands of people are working since the last ten years, in adult education, but by the eyes of the law is as if they don't exist. There is no ethical or deontological code for these professionals; everybody is working on the field, with scanty trainings promoted by ANQ. We must recognize the efforts of these professional groups, working mostly with their own referent values, assumptions, beliefs, prejudice, etc.). And we know that working with people, adult people and their story lives can be a challenge in multiple senses.

The ongoing research intends to uncover the way this is being done today in Portuguese adult education field.

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<sup>i</sup> IEFP, ANQ. (2010), *Encaminhamento dos desempregados inscritos nos Centros de Emprego sem o 12º ano completo para a rede nacional de Centros Novas Oportunidades*. Lisboa: Nota de Procedimentos.

<sup>ii</sup> Avaliação Externa da Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades Ruptura e Inovação: Diagnóstico.

