

**Feeling socially included:
When adult education (mainly) has an individual purpose**

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Abstract

After four decades without consistent public policies of adult education, the Portuguese population is showing an “educational deficit” compared with other European Union countries. Several basic education forms of provision have been developed in the last decade. Of these forms of provision, the recognition, validation and certification of competences (recognition of prior learning - RPL) is analysed in this paper. From an intergenerational education point of view, RPL raises awareness of differences in behaviour, attitudes and values shared by various social groups. It involves discussion on the diversity of life paths followed by people, too.

This paper is based on a research project designed to understand the influence of RPL in adults’ lives. It was directed at interpreting the ways people look at their lives in educational terms and the meanings given to learning. An interpretative approach was preferred, involving the use of data collection by means of questionnaires and interviews. The purpose was to intersect quantitative and qualitative data.

Data discussion revealed the stress placed by adults on learning. RPL also reinforced social inclusion, mainly through the use of information and communication technologies. Group sessions on the recognition of prior learning and training enabled people to become more aware of differences in knowledge held by various generations and to see the importance of adult education in diminishing social and cultural exclusion. However, RPL was mainly considered a process with an individual purpose.

Key words: adult education, recognition of prior learning, intergenerational education

An intergenerational adult basic education policy

Several decades without any continuing public policies of adult education have left the Portuguese population with an “educational deficit” (Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades, 2005; among others). Data from 2010 show that of the 9,037,200 Portuguese population aged 15 or over 2,306,400 had 4 years of basic education, while 1,171,800 had 6 years. Therefore, more than 4 million could sign up to public forms of provision to achieve 9 years of basic education and the full 12 years (equivalent to secondary education).

Table 1 - School certification levels of the Portuguese population aged 15 or more (2011) – approximate numbers

Year	Total	Not certified	4 years	6 years	9 years	12 years	Higher education
2011	9,037,200	961,000	2,306,400	1,171,800	1,872,000	1,518,400	1,207,600

Source: Pordata (retrieved on 13-06-2012).

The low level of school certification is a problem that gained relevance in policy agendas after the Democratic Revolution of 25th of April 1974. Various policies were adopted from the 1970s up to the mid 1980s with the aim of improving adult basic education rates, but the results were not convincing (cf. Melo & Benavente, 1978; Lima et al., 1988; Silva, 1990). The Framework Law of the Educational System (in Portuguese *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo, Lei n.º 46/86, de 14 de Outubro*) was approved in 1986. After this, second-chance education courses directed at adults who did not have basic school or secondary education became generalised. Some years later several authors criticised more than ten years of such provision with meagre results. Several barriers led to high adult drop-out rates and failure. This turned second-chance education into a form of provision mainly attended by young people (Sancho, 1996; Esteves, 1996; Pinto, Matos & Rothes, 1998). They tended to be people who had dropped out of regular school education and were searching for an alternative path to complete basic and secondary education.

In the late 1990s a public policy to re-launch adult basic education was adopted to rectify the situation. Several policy documents stated that Portugal could be seen as a “third-world country within Europe” in relation to school certification, qualification and literacy rates. This meant that Portugal languished in the bottom ranks of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) index of human development. This was a diagnosis that anticipated a “deep and threatening crisis influencing employment, economic competition, internal social and economic and participation rates” (Melo et al., 1998: 11-12).

The Know+. Programme for the development and expansion of adult education and training (in Portuguese *S@ber+. Programa para o Desenvolvimento e Expansão da Educação e Formação de Adultos*) was adopted in 1999 by the National Agency for adult education and training (in Portuguese *Agência Nacional de Educação e Formação de Adultos*). Although abandoned in 2002, while under development its main goals were to establish basic education forms of provision in order “to create conditions for the full exercise of the social right of lifelong education and training of all” (Melo, Matos & Silva, 2001: 21). For this purpose, two forms of provision were established - RPL and Adult education and training courses. These were innovative provisions in the Portuguese context: educational paths that valued experience and learning were created for the first time and furthermore these paths connected education (a school-influenced path) with training (a path devised to insert adults in the labour market).

Until the mid 2000s these two forms of provision involved around 70,000 adults (cf. Ávila, 2004; Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades, 2005), a figure considered insufficient given the dramatic situation identified in many policy discourses. This allowed the adoption of the New opportunities initiative (in Portuguese *Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades*) in 2005. The main goal of this Programme was to boost adult basic education rates. This goal was afterwards supplemented due to the urgency of improving “basic training attendance rates of adults already inserted in the labour market” and “vocational qualification rates”. There was an appeal for a “strong acceleration of adults’ qualification rates, for Portugal to converge with more developed countries’ indicators”. This convergence effort, seen as a “strategic challenge”, extended well beyond the educational domain: it was intended to stimulate economic growth, productivity, economic competition rates and to improve the salary indicators of the Portuguese workforce to achieve rates closer to those of countries such as Norway, Germany and Spain (*Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades*, 2005: 11). Since 2007 these forms of provision have been attended by large numbers of adults, embracing several age groups (older than 18) and social groups (provided the individuals had not benefited from basic or secondary school education). Within this framework the RPL was given particular emphasis (compared with Adult education and training courses, attended by 12,000 adults). In March 2012, more than 512,000 people earned a school education certification for 4, 6, 9 or 12 years’ schooling after attending RPL. Of these, 37.9% were aged 35 to 44, 26.7% were aged 45 to 54 and 22% were aged 25 to 34 (cf. ANQEP, 2012), which indicates the involvement of large sectors of the Portuguese population.

RPL – an individual educational path

RPL is a form of provision that values prior learning acquired throughout life. Although it is school-subject influenced, it is supported by a set of standards (key competences) believed to be essential in contemporary Portuguese society. The process is based on the review of adults’ life stories with the aim of identifying key competences established in key competence benchmarks. Therefore, the RPL requires an individual work – the writing of a portfolio – requiring the review of life stories that generated learning. Each person’s biography has to be supported by data that enables competences to be validated and certified. The portfolio is therefore “evidenced-based”, which in many circumstances involves the collection and presentation of personal objects, such as photographs, drawings, etc. This is supplemented by recognition of prior learning group sessions and training (up to 50 hours) with training in specific contents. People wanting a certificate of 4, 6 or 9 years of school education take subjects such as “Language and Communication”, “Information and Communication Technologies”, “Maths for Life” and “Citizenship and Employability”, while those wanting a certificate of 12 years of school education take “Citizenship and Professionality”, “Society, Technology and Science” and “Culture, Language and Communication” (cf. Alonso et al., 2002; Gomes, 2006).

Although mainly based on individual work, the group sessions encourage the sharing of knowledge among the adults on the programme. During these sessions, people recognise their differences and similarities and those in their life stories, experience and knowledge. The adults might think about themselves and each other, and about various ways of living and thinking. Intergenerational education stresses the sharing of knowledge and skills among generations for the purpose of creating positive ideas about life and ageing. It also promotes tolerant attitudes towards different lifestyles and modes of understanding the various living patterns in society (cf. Palmeirão, 2008). RPL might

therefore favour the collective development of an inclusive society by making people aware of social rights, especially of older citizens, and having a more coherent attitude to social differences based on age. Although it is mainly an individual path, RPL raises awareness of differences in behaviour, attitudes and values shared by different social groups. It involves, too, discussion about the diversity of situations people have to face. For these reasons it can be a basis for the construction of “new forms of solidarity” and for processes of social integration. It can also strengthen an interdependent attitude among people, based on exchange and intergeneration sociability. Being a form of providing basic adult education, it might foster social inclusion in a society that values knowledge, social justice, difference and tolerance.

Given the radical traditions of adult education, one might expect RPL to have a “social purpose”. According to Crowther and Martin (2005: 442-443): within this understanding adult learners are to be considered citizens and actors, “i.e. agents in their own right”; the curriculum should be based on shared social and political interests; knowledge should be built through the use of active methods and should aim to advance these interests; pedagogy should be supported “by dialogue rather than transmission”; critical reflection should be fostered and lead to “social and political engagement”; and education should be “a key resource in the struggle to extend citizenship and democracy”. These are all reasons why RPL might overcome the individual dimension that any educational activity involves. It can emphasise a “social purpose” with the development of “really useful knowledge” for changing (ones and others) representations of life and real life conditions.

Methodology

The research “Educational Paths and Adults Lives” (in Portuguese *Percursos Educativos e Vidas dos Adultos*) was developed by the Unit for Adult Education of the University of Minho at the request of the Association for the development of the Homem, Cávado and Ave Uplands (in Portuguese *Associação para o Desenvolvimento das Terras Altas do Homem, Cávado e Ave - ATAHCA*) in 2011. This research stemmed from the preoccupation of this non-governmental association with the improvement of its local intervention and the connection between the activities implemented and the interests of local communities. Therefore, the research aimed at acknowledging work done by the association’s New Opportunities Centre in which the RPL was developed (Lima & Guimarães, 2012).

This research was implemented from May to November 2011 with the goal of assessing the influence of RPL in adults who earned school education certification for 4, 6, 9 and 12 years’ schooling after attending the programme in the ATAHCA, since 2006 when the Centre started to run this programme. The idea was to identify and understand what people could have gained in cognitive terms, what behavioural and attitudinal changes occurred in the social, political, cultural and civic spheres identified by the adult participants themselves, by adult educators and by the staff of local enterprises employing these adults.

The first stage included a survey based on a questionnaire (cf. McMillan & Schumacher, 2010: 196-205). According to Ferreira, the questionnaire is a technique founded on the principle that it can be applied to social units, but does not take into account any variations of the characteristics of each unit. In light of this, our inquiry was applied to adults who had earned a school education certificate after attending the RPL programme. It was designed to collect representations of changes that were identified by adults who were certified under RPL. The representations of these changes were treated in a similar way and were considered equivalent. In addition, it was

considered that these declared changes were the social phenomena under analysis, something that could be “verbalised by individuals; due to their stable character, these changes could be apprehended by the researcher and interpreted” (Ferreira, 1999: 168-169). The questionnaire was sent out to 1,439 people, of whom 410 (28.5%) responded and thus formed the sample under analysis.

The second stage of data collection involved semi-structured interviews. Interviews are based on a specific set of questions in order to collect information on one or more selected subjects (cf. McMillan & Schumacher, 2010: 342-365). Twenty interviews were conducted on adult participants (8), adult educators (8) and on the staff of local enterprises where the adults were working (4).

Some data collected by the questionnaire and by interviews (of the 8 RPL participants) have been used in this paper (cf. Lima & Guimarães, 2012). The goal was to discuss meanings assigned to RPL and the intergenerational dimensions involved. The following questions guided this discussion: from an intergenerational point of view, how did the surveyed adults see RPL? What meanings they give to declared changes?

Analysis of data collected

Enjoying learning

The 410 individuals surveyed through the questionnaire were mainly women (63.7%), born between 1958 and 1981, of whom 28.5% were born between 1970 and 1975 and 20.7% between 1964 and 1969. This showed that RPL involved many different generations.

Table 2 - Years of birth of surveyed people

Years	No answer	1940-1945	1946-1951	1952-1957	1958-1963	1964-1969	1970-1975	1976-1981	1982-1987	1988-1993
%	0.7	0.5	3.2	6.3	15.6	20.7	28.5	16.1	7.1	1.2

Almost half of the inquired (45.9%) had attended 6 years of school education before enrolling in RPL, while 23.2% had 9 years of school education and 19.3% 4 years. As a result, the 9 years school education certificate was the one earned by the majority of the surveyed individuals (64.4%), while 32.9% obtained the 12 years certificate.

RPL is a form of provision directed at adults with a low level of schooling, people who were not the usual participants in adult education activities. According to a national survey on education and training undertaken by the National institute of statistics in 2007, 72.2% of people aged between 45 and 54 and 64% in the 35 to 44 age bracket did not join or did not want to join adult education activities (cf. INE, 2007: 61). This indicates that before enrolling in RPL most of the adults were probably not motivated to learn or to join education and training activities.

Even if it is not a traditional education path, because it is mainly based on the recognition of prior learning acquired throughout life in non-formal and informal contexts, the data collected showed that RPL promoted learning and an interest in developing new knowledge and skills. Furthermore, a predisposition for learning and for knowing about “new things” was engaged, especially when it came to information and communication technologies (ICT):

“Was RPL important for you?

It was very important.

Why was it important?

It was important because I found out new things, I have learned new things that I would have never otherwise have learned. For instance, using ICT. (...) I was able to develop my skills in ICT and maybe if I hadn't joined RPL I wouldn't” (E FM 04)

The use of computers and the Internet encouraged the collection of information, in what the interviewees called “research”. As Lopes stated in another study (2011: 291), computers enable data of a general character or on a specific subject to be found on the Internet, which involves learning and stimulates social participation within a family and social context when these “new” topics are shared and discussed. Interviewees thus seemed aware of the importance of learning, of improving knowledge and skills in order to face the challenges of contemporary society. They felt “socially included” owing to the development of new knowledge and tasks, as someone mentioned:

“You said you have developed an interest in learning, haven’t you?”

Well, as I got older I didn’t learn much. (..) But today the first thing I do when I get up is to start the computer and the Internet, to read emails and the most important news... And if there is something interesting I start a search and spend lots of time researching on a specific matter. (...) I now have more skills than I had a year ago. (...) I read the newspaper every day on the Internet. That is one of my interests. It’s the first thing I do in the morning. I mainly like reading things that tell me what is going on. Today I read more than I did before; I feel the need to read. And to know more about some topics for which I had to do research”. (E FM 04)

In spite of enjoying learning, of considering it important to learn in a changing society, of feeling that they were “agents in their own right” and “more critical” in relation to social themes of general interest, data collected in this study did not identify the adults’ “social and political engagement within a struggle for extending citizenship and democracy” (cf. Crowther & Martin, 2005). In fact, RPL raised individual awareness of life in general, and of problems and opportunities faced by adults, but it prompted perception neither of the collective dimensions of life nor of the possibilities of changing real life conditions within society.

Feeling socially included

The majority of the adults surveyed considered that RPL enabled them to know more about specific problems and “to be alert to the importance of other matters”, so that 78.8% could say that they felt they belonged to society and had skills for participating in different domains (social, civic, political, cultural, etc.).

Table 3 - Answer rates for the question: Do you feel able to participate in different social domains?

Answers	No answer	Yes	No	Not applicable
%	7.1	78.8	11	3.2

This feeling lessened the feeling of “social inferiority” (Ávila, 2008: 341-345) due to the lack or the low level of school certification held before RPL. As noted “The most important thing with RPL was to get the 9 years of school education certificate. The diploma. The process was enriching and I liked it a lot. But for me the most important thing was to get the 9 years of school certificate. It was very important” (E FM 08). As also mentioned:

“What was the biggest contribution of RPL, what have you gained from it?”

I think it is my own self-esteem.

You felt that you knew things but before RPL you were not aware of what you knew?

Yes, the feeling that your life is valued. Because we didn’t value it. On the other hand, it is a path that is over, the one of school education. If you haven’t got it [the certificate], there is something missing. Now I can say that I have done 12 years of school education. I don’t feel so bad now”. (E FM 02)

Holding a school education certificate involved a feeling of social justice - the diploma was somehow deserved by having overcome difficult life circumstances and learned from them. RPL represented “an award for those who learned through life” (E FM 01).

Apart from individual learning, learning with the others was often mentioned by interviewees:

“To be with other people is important too. (...) When we attend RPL we find a group. This group may become a group of friends and sociability happens. This is very important and we miss this sort of thing” (E FM 06).

The sessions of recognition of learning acquired throughout life and the training sessions in which active pedagogic methods were used helped the adults to become more interested and aware of differences in knowledge held by various generations. Group work favoured dialogue, in particular through the telling of biographical narratives, stories that happened to others and to themselves. The perception that people “were different” and “had different lives” was the main outcome of sharing life stories within a group. Therefore, experiences were reviewed and discussed and they were shared and assessed more objectively:

“Would you recommend a friend or a relative to join RPL?”

Yes. On the whole, it was a very good experience. It was most enriching. I got to know other people’s life stories. There were some stories that were more complicated than mine... after hearing these stories, I valued mine. There are people that have faced many challenges to get where they got today. (...)

You mean that you feel more aware of yourself and of the other people?

Exactly. I believe RPL shows us different sides of life’s daily problems. You work all day long and you don’t see people around you, who are facing difficulties that you don’t have. After that you value more what you have got” (E FM 02).

Reflecting on life involved the valuing of personal biography, an effort based on “reliving life, reliving times of each of our lives that were already forgotten” (E FM 04). This sharing on many occasions motivated intergenerational solidarity that was reinforced during the recognition of prior learning and training sessions.

However, these intervals of thinking about their own and others’ lives and of sharing mainly had an individual purpose. Even while this discussion stimulated the human potential of each generation for developing new spaces of communication and participation, it involved processes of individual learning, knowledge and experience. In fact, RPL did not primarily have a “social purpose”. Adults could “be together” in sessions of recognition of prior learning acquired throughout life and in 50 hours of training sessions. The purpose of these periods was not to enhance social and political engagement within local communities or in society, and learning and education were not resources in the struggle to extend citizenship and democracy (cf. Crowther & Martin, 2005). RPL was mainly a process of individual empowerment.

Final remarks

RPL has enjoyed an extensive development in Portugal in the past decade, to a degree quite uncommon in terms of the history of education of this country or in comparison with similar forms of provision developed in other countries. Even though it involved adults who were not regular participants in adult education, RPL engaged interest in the value of learning and of searching for information in several settings, especially via the Internet.

Being mainly an individual learning path, RPL includes group sessions (of recognition of prior learning and of training). From an intergenerational point of view, RPL might

raise awareness about different behaviours, attitudes, values shared by various social groups. In group sessions discussion could be about adults' life paths and other issues. RPL could therefore be seen as a relevant device for reflecting on themselves and on others, for encouraging dialogue and for improving social inclusion, due to the issues of individual and social interest that were examined.

The critical reflection fostered did not lead to the social and political engagement of adults, and this education path was not a resource in the struggle to extend citizenship and democracy (cf. Crowther & Martin 2005). RPL mostly encouraged the individual dimension of learning and did not emphasise the "social purpose" of education. Nor did it not support the changing of either life conditions or the critical awareness of their and other adults' life paths.

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