

# CHANGES IN THE ACTIVITY OF THE ADULT EDUCATOR

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**Abstract:** *This article aims at analyzing the influence of the specificity of the practices of recognition, validation and certification of non formal and informal learning on the functions and knowledge of the adult educators, work with adult low school education levels. From a theoretical point of view, we have based our research on the issues of adult education, experiential learning, and evaluation. Apart from an analysis of the functions and knowledge required to the trainers who work in the teams of the studied centres of recognition, validation and certification of non formal and informal learning we are going to examine the issues which they are confronted to in their professional practices.*

**Key words:** *recognition, validation, non formal and informal learning, adult educator, changes.*

## 1. Introduction

This article aims at analyzing the specificity of the recognition and validation of the non formal and informal learning practices on the functions and knowledge of the educators who take part in this process, oriented towards adults with low school education levels. It also aims at researching the training of such professionals at university level. The process of recognition, validation and certification of competences was established in Portugal in 2001. It is integrated in public policies, in a network of Centres of recognition, validation and certification of competences. (This will hereinafter be referred to as 'Centre').

Through the recognition of learning, these centres allow the educational certification of the individuals aged over 18 and having benefited from less than 12

years of formal education. The attributed certificates are of B1 level (4th year of education), B2 level (6th year of education) B3 level (9th year of education) and recently, B4 level (12 years of education).

The decision concerning the level of education to be attributed to the adult learner essentially depends on two factors: the level of education of the adult at the time when he is integrated in the centre and the learning he proves to have obtained in different contexts (familial, social, professional and educational/professional training) in the course of his whole life. The learning recognized until the 9th year of education constitute the basic knowledge level in the following fields: mathematics for life, language and communication techniques of information

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and communication, citizenship and employment.

The learning to be recognized and validated are identified in the key-competences frame of reference, the working instrument around which the teams of the centres organize and develop the entire process of recognition and validation of learning. Each centre is constituted by a team composed of a coordinator, a diagnose technique, RVC (Recognition and Validation of Competences) specialists, adult educators and an administrative agent. Each centre also keeps contact with external evaluators, one of whom is always part of the validation jury. The validation jury consists in RVC professionals, the educators of the centre and an external evaluator.

The topic presented in this article belongs to a doctoral research in adult education and it is based on a case study, conducted in three Centres of recognition, validation and certification of competences, based in Portugal. From an epistemological point of view, this qualitative research has been essentially influenced by the phenomenological and critical perspectives. In order to understand the process of recognition, validation and certification of the non formal and informal learning as a 'social phenomenon', and its impact on the functions and knowledge of the adult trainer, we have opted for the collection, analysis and triangulation of a series of data obtained from documentary information on the topic and interviews.

We have not only conducted semi-structured interviews with the team members of the three Centres, but also biographical interviews with the adults certified by those centres. Starting from the empirical elements collected during our

research, our aim is to analyze the specificity of the process of recognition and validation of the experiential learning and to reflect upon the consequences of this specificity in the changes of the activity of the adult trainer, highlighting the role of higher education in the training of this new type of adult educators.

The primary objective of this research is to discuss the issues which the following questions raise: Which are the implications of the processes of recognition and validation of the learning of less educated adults on the functions and knowledge of the adult educators who work in these centres? What part does higher education (university level) play in the training of this type of adult educators? The research is structured in three parts: the first part aims at clarifying the specificities of the processes of recognition and validation of the experiential learning and their influence on the functions and knowledge of the professionals who work on this process; the second part comments on the challenges and tensions inherent to this type of professional activity, and lastly, the third part gives our opinion on the role of higher education in training this type of educators.

## **2. The Hypothesis**

From a theoretical point of view, this research is based on a variety of contributions of social sciences, for, we consider that, apart from defining and clearly establishing the frontiers with other sciences, it is useful and pertinent to concentrate our efforts on the construction of a singular object of study which should 'appeal to the theoretical and conceptual heritage which tends to be common to the different social sciences' [5]. The theoretical and conceptual heritage has helped us understand the specificity and

complexity of the process of recognition, validation and certification of the learning, and have a 'critical perspective' on these social practices. The process of recognition, validation and certification of the experiential learning has already had a long history at a social and scientific level, in the field of adult education, but the augmentation of such practices is a very recent phenomenon, derived from the European and national public policies in the field of the education and training of adults.

The process of recognition and validation of the experiential learning is based on the hypothesis that there is continuity between experience and learning, to the extent that the processes of learning are interdependent on the non formal and informal learning of experiences. The anterior hypothesis stands at the basis of the learning process, as Josso said all training is experiential, if it is not experiential, it is not training, because there is no similarity to everyday life events [13]. Thus, we admit that learning results from the need to reply to the challenges and unpredictable events that everyday life offers. Consequently, learning is a life-long process, in the most diverse of contexts, by informal, non-formal and formal methods.

At the level of its hypothesis, of its organization and functionality, the process of recognition and validation of learning is diametrically opposed to the traditional school model [10], [3], [6], this having notorious consequences on the functions and knowledge of the professionals who train adults. The adults who take part in the process of recognition and validation of the experiential learning are considered to be individuals having a unique life

experience, this being their main resource for the completion of the procedure.

This experience is read as a 'positive statement' aiming to identify and maximize what the person has learned in life. In this process, education is perceived as a continuous experience in time and space and a 'production of the self, for the self' where the individual 'uses himself as a resource' [4]. The evaluative dimension is present, and it could be said that it is of capital importance to the process of recognition, validation and certification of competences. This evaluative dimension has some specific traits essentially connected to the nature of the process under discussion [2], [11].

In these processes, contrary to the traditional educational methods, one does not have to evaluate previously transmitted knowledge, which is present in a curriculum, but has to evaluate the learning resulting from experiential learning [22-9-20-12], which are being produced during the life of every individual. The fact that these new practices are based, on the one hand, on suppositions that require an evolution of the social relationship with knowledge (for example interrogating the social value of the experiential knowledge), and on the other hand, on innovative methodologies (experiential approach) contributes to their possibility of creating ruptures and starting a 'revolution' [2], [11], or a 'shock wave' [19], with repercussions in various fields. Our research has enabled us to understand that this 'revolution' has had obvious repercussions on the professional activity of adult educators, directly involved in the process of recognition and validation of experiential learning.

### **3. Recognition and validation of learning: Which is the position of the Adult Trainer?**

In the studied centres, the teams admit the central position of the subject in the learning process and adhere to the 'perspective of production of knowledge, which is diametrically opposed to the cumulative, molecular and transmissive conception proper to the traditional school' [4]. These hypotheses have profound implications on the organization of the layout, methodologies, instruments, as well as on the functions and knowledge of the involved professionals.

We begin by clarifying the hypothesis, which stands at the basis of this paper. The professionals who work on the process of recognition and validation of the experiential learning, designated, some by RVC professionals and others by educators, are, in some cases, in our opinion, adult educators. Primarily, we shall identify the role of each of them in this process; afterwards, we shall try to explain why they are adult educators; lastly, we shall identify the challenges and tensions inherent to this professional activity. In our research, we have observed that the team educators in the Centres, who are responsible for the process of recognition and validation of the experiential learning, mainly exercise functions related to the evaluation of the experiential learning, thus trespassing the function traditionally associated to educators – the transmission of knowledge. This change of the main function traditionally associated to the educators comes from the final aim and from the specificity of this process. The collected data allowed us to understand the functions and knowledge required to the educators taking part in the process of recognition and validation of experiential learning's,

also enabling us to understand the reasons of the transformation of their professional activity.

The educators integrated in the teams of the Centres assure various functions that modify the functional content of the professional activity of the trainer. They play a very important part in all the phases of the recognition and validation of learning process, and they accomplish diverse functions. In the recognition phase these educators aim at attaining two objectives: to explore the life pattern of each adult, so as to collect elements enabling them to detect to what extent the adult presents the referential elements ; to motivate the adult and get him involved in the process of reflection, self-analysis, self-recognition and self-evaluation. In the validation phase, these educators can validate the experiential learning of the adults; to critically interpret and analyze, the key-competences guide; to reformulate/create problematic situations and enable the complementary training.

The educator encourage the adult to remember his life experiences, they encourage the dialogue, the description of activities corresponding to each task or function, the writing process, the debate, the cooperation and interpersonal relations between the members of a group. These educators assume the role of a companion, in the sense that they are 'facilitators [...] emancipators' [17]. The main topic of conversation, reflection and debate is the life pattern, the interests and motivations of the adult. Accompanying the adult is fundamental during the entire phase of recognition. It is precisely a relation of personalized help which allows the trainer to guide the adult in the good direction, to motivate him, to reinforce his implication, to develop his self-recognition and self-esteem. As Le Bouëdec states 'to

accompany means to go with somebody or something [...] side by side' [14].

The trainer takes a tour with the adult while the latter describes his life in written. During this process of organizing the portfolio, the adult is the actor playing the leading part, while the part of the trainer is to 'sustain, protect, honour, serve, help reach his goal' [14]. In adopting the companion role, the trainer manifests an attitude of treasuring the other, of positive and emphatic listening. To use the terms employed by Hennezel and Montigny [14]: 'among the basic qualities of a good companion I insist on humility, authenticity, spontaneity, flexibility, generosity, an open spirit, respect for difference, emphatic listening and the capacity to manage silence'. These educators may consider themselves as 'facilitators' in the sense attributed to the term by [13], because they care to know where the person wants to go and try to understand what type of help they can offer in a certain time of his journey.

The educators are confronted to challenges due to the complexity of one of these main functions, namely the evaluation of learning based on the life pattern of the adult. The recognition and validation implicitly involve an important work of evaluation which requires adapting and creating innovative methodologies and instruments, to ensure the specificity of the process. In the process of recognition and validation of the experiential learning 'the classical solutions of acquisition control do not seem to be best adapted' [1]. The frame of reference is the main working instrument of the teams in the Centres, and the educators consider that certain statements are based on disciplines to which they do not attribute any social usage. At the same time, the evaluation instruments have to

make sense to the adult, to facilitate his involvement and self-evaluation, allowing them to infer and to evaluate learning.

For the educators, it is extremely difficult to conceive such instruments, mainly because it is necessary to bring together elements presenting very different characteristics, such as the experiential learning's of each adult and the elements in the reference frame. The knowledge resulting from action is operative, precarious, diffuse and original. This type of knowledge is very difficult to be stated. The nature of knowledge coming from action gives great difficulty to educators, especially when they aim to establish connections between the experiential learning's of the adult and the elements in the reference frame. In other words, the educators in the process of recognition and validation of the experiential learning's mainly exercise functions related to companionship and evaluation, thus furthering themselves from the traditional function associated to educators- the transmission of knowledge. This change in the main function traditionally associated to educators results from the purpose of the Centres and contributes to the augmentation of diversity and mutability of the professional profiles of educators, identified by various authors, as Leclerq's affirmation shows [16] 'the missions of training are being continuously redefined; the frames of a profession seem vague and of variable geometry'. In order to properly realize their role, the educators need to develop specific skills, relatively distinct from those that were required when they were either learners or educators in the frame of professional training.

Some of the educators in the studied Centres had had an experience of training in a scholarly context, which has kept them from reorganizing and reformulating their

ways of intervention. This is clearly deduced from the following comment given by one of the interviewed educators 'I had to forget what I had learned at school [when I taught classes]'. This capacity to 'forget' and 'un-learn', according to the terms of Josso [13], is fundamental for the change process to take place.

However, knowing how to 'forget' entails complex processes, at a cognitive and emotional level, which are possible only when the actors are involved and motivated to face new challenges.

The changes operated in the professional activity of the adult trainer manifest themselves at the level of functions and attitudes alike. One of the hypotheses inherent to the intervention of this type of trainer is inspired from the humanist theory sustained by Rogers [23], according to which all people possess the necessary resources for their personal development, the role of the educator being that of an empathic listener, of helping the adult understand things by means of rephrasing. This Hypothesis is fundamental in the process of recognition and validation of competences, because the trainer does not aim primarily at transmitting formal content to the adults, but rather at identifying and maximizing the competences they possess, by guiding their development on the basis of their experiences and resources. As deduced, this hypothesis has implications on the role of the trainer; he becomes the 'facilitator, supports the learning process, organizes complex situations, invents problems and challenges, and comes up with enigmas or projects' [21].

While exercising their functions, the educators maximize the experience of adults, they apprehend the theory/ practice

in a dialectic relation, they encourage the dialogue, reflection and debate on subjects concerning the life of adults, challenging them to interfere, and they establish a learning relationship with them. Educators and adults teach and learn simultaneously, this being the main objective of the education frame, sustained by Freire [10]. These educators help the adult candidates (re)shape their life experience, this being the main role of the school and the educator, according to Dewey [7].

The professional practices of the trainer entail the contact with unknown elements at scientific and social level- the experiential learning's, the evaluation of learning, the competence frame, the evaluation of competences, the guidance of the adult in order to help him (re)shape his life experience and his learning. Consequently, the educators are obliged to a learning process in order to continuously discover things. It manifests itself by learning 'by practice, with successive adjustments' [14]. The educators, who also establish a learning relationship with their colleagues in the centre, included in complex and specific social practices, learn mostly by action and reflection on action [24]. But they also maximize life-long learning, which they consider essential to their professional evolution.

#### **4. The Role of Higher Education in Training Adult Educators**

The complexity and specificity of the elements inherent to the process of recognition and validation of experiential learning has multiple consequences in the professional activity of the adult trainer in the studied centres. As already mentioned, the educators learn new functions starting

from practices, with the help of processes of:

- hetero-training starting from the contact and reflection with their colleagues ;
- eco-training starting from the contact with new hypotheses, new notions, new methodologies and tools, very different from those of traditional education;
- self-training starting from the reflection and individual ownership of life experiences.

In their everyday life, they constantly face new challenges, tensions and dilemmas, without knowing their origins in most cases.

Formal training is fundamental to this type of educators in order to enable them to understand the complexity and specificity of their practices, because there is 'a tendency to underestimate the fundamental difficulties which are at times attached to the principles and practices of validation of knowledge' [11]. These educators have already had superior educational background in various scientific fields, but we notice lack of specific knowledge in the field of education, which is fundamental for evaluation in their professional practices. We find ourselves at a point where the public policies militate for the increase of the recognition and validation practices, and this requires an extremely rigorous training for the educators, because 'the ideology, enthusiasm, or opportunism are not enough, either for developing good theory, or for developing good practice' [11].

University plays a very important part in the training of educators who deal with the recognition and validation of experiential learning. The democratization of these practices of recognition and validation of learning is recent, which leads to the emergence of a domain of new social practices, still under construction.

These practices cause very complex political, scientific and technical questions at the level of methodological principles. The complexity, specificity and the experimenting, inherent to this type of practices justify the importance of the training of educators. To properly comply to the requirements of this professional activity, the training must : a) promote the reflexion on professional practices, so as to help the trainer to understand his path, his knowledge, his problems, the challenges, the dilemmas, and his own learning process ; b) promote critical reflection over the politics and practices of adult training, in order to better understand the complexity of these practices, the purposes, the tensions and the dilemmas which are inherent to them; c) promote the creation of projects of intervention in order to enhance the professional practices.

Asking these educators to build an autobiographical narration, centred on the professional development is a valid option. In order to interfere in the training of other adults, it is fundamental to understand the process of self-training. The option of the autobiographical narration is even more pertinent, given that the process of recognition and validation is based on the experiential approach. It is also a strategy which allows the comprehension of the difficulties met by the adult candidate, in the remembrance, selection, writing and reflection on learning.

The reflection on the elements of complexity of these practices is necessary to better understand their difficulties in the everyday professional life. In our opinion, the main elements of complexity in these practices are *experience, experiential learning and evaluation*.

The concept of experience is inexact; it carries a large number of significations. Experience has a dynamic character, it is continuously brought under discussion and transformed based on the new situations lived by the subject. This allows the evolution of the individual, in a continuous process, which is, eventually, a life-long training process. The extension of the concept of experience is due to the fact that experience 'merges with the presence of the subject in the world, it has permanent interactions with the medium and with the self, even the non-facts, non-actions, non-communications are experiences' [25]. Nonetheless, it is advisable to note that 'not every experience necessarily becomes a learning opportunity, but the experience in itself constitutes a learning potential' [8].

It is a difficult and complex task, both for learners and educators, to understand if unconscious learning has taken place, or if, on the contrary the experience has not given place to any learning opportunity. Apart from this difficulty, in the identification of experiential learning, there is also the issue of comparing the learning to the elements in the reference frame. These elements have such distinct features, that it would be impossible to compare them without appealing to a simplification. The process of recognition and validation has as objective to 'make visible'» [18] the learning that little educated adults possess, but in most cases are not aware of, ignore or minimize; this involves a complex and rigorous work of evaluation departing from life experience. The evaluation always contains a judgement of value, resulting from the comparison between the existing and the desired situation. In the present case, the existing situation is the life path of the adult and the learning he gained (indicators), whereas the desired situation

is the key-competences reference frame (comparison criteria). The evaluation process is always a complicated one, and when it comes to evaluating experiential learning, the situation is even more delicate, which constitutes a difficulty domain in this process. The complexity requires the educators to permanently reflect on the practices, criticizing the organization of the process, the methodologies, the tools, while at the same time allowing their (re)invention.

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