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edited by Barbara Merrill

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**Transitions to the dominant
literacy. The views of
the coordinators of New
Opportunities Centres on the
recognition of prior learning**

Introduction

The New Opportunities Initiative (*Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades*), particularly the recognition of prior learning (*Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências - RVCC*) has brought about the largest movement of 'requalification' of adults ever seen in Portugal. On the national political agenda this process was considered a priority for the certification of basic and secondary education. At the same time it was viewed as a pillar for converting society and the economy within the framework of globalisation and the strategy for lifelong learning promoted by the European Union. The RVCC process consists of assessing skills acquired by adults throughout their lives, which, for this purpose, are contained in a portfolio that includes a life story together with other written evidence of those competences. Because it is not mainly an education and training process, but a recognition one, the RVCC is based on adults' ability at narrative writing. It thus involves an assessment of literacy skills while also intending to improve competences in the use and production of texts. Consequently, it can be said that in this process what is at stake is the validation of vernacular literacy practices by reference to the characteristics and patterns of the dominant ones. The way this relationship between vernacular practices and dominant ones is viewed by the local promoters of the RVCC – the New Opportunities Centres (*Centros Novas Oportunidades*) is, from our point of view, a determinant for the kind of literate identities to be legitimated and transformed by this process.

Under a wider research project that is being developed at the University of Minho and University of Algarve about the impact of RVCC processes on the literacy lives of adults, nine New Opportunities Centres' (NOCs) coordinators, the people heading their pedagogical and management areas, have been interviewed. For the purpose of this article we selected three of the nine interviews and data about the way these actors valued vernacular practices and viewed the conditions for transition to the dominant literacy.

The analysis of what might be called the official pedagogical discourse of the NOCs' coordinators, in relation to adult literacy, already allowed: i) the identification of (dis)continuities between the guidance contained in official discourses and declared practices, ii) a 'deficit' discourse about the adults who are seeking certification, and iii) positive representations about the trajectories of the adults, with particular emphasis on their identity transitions concerning literacy. RVCC was strongly valued as a means for developing literacy skills, although from a viewpoint marked by 'academic' perspectives and 'school-like' approaches. A significant concern about regulatory practices' impact on adults' identity transitions was noted in NOCs' coordinators' discourses while problematisation, critical reflection and effective transformation of ways adults built narratives about their lives were downplayed.

The Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences: a new context, a new educational process

Policy discourses produced by the European Union (EU) and by the Portuguese Government and the government department responsible for developing adult education and training policy in the last decade have called for the building of a knowledge-based society and an information-based society. This call included aims concerning the rise of productivity and the improvement of people's employability. They were devoted to developing the Portuguese economy to make it more sustainable and competitive in terms of globalisation. The poor school and vocational qualification standards of the Portuguese population were considered constraints on economic development.

It was against this background that the adult education and training policy was adopted in 1999. This policy's strategy has been extended significantly since 2007 with respect to adults' access. 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 vocational qualification (levels I, II, III and IV according to EU guidelines). The recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) was therefore stressed. It aimed at 'formally recognizing skills developed by adults throughout life (in professional, social, family, etc. contexts) and giving these skills an equivalence to school qualifications, providing 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 domains among others – the RVCC was regarded mainly as a place for recognising learning. It was formally seen as having the same value as other processes within formal education and training systems. In policy guidelines and educational documents it was argued that experience led to tacit and implicit learning and the RVCC gave this a value, once it had been identified, designated, given visibility and legitimacy within personal, professional and social dimensions (Pires, 2007). Furthermore, the RVCC programme had a secondary aim, which was to develop learning and competences, especially with respect to literacy, because literacy was seen as pivotal to achieving all the tasks adults had to achieve through the RVCC programme.

In general, it is possible to argue that the principles on which the RVCC was based were *coherent with the ideological model of literacy*. This model sees literacy as a set of social, historical and cultural practices within events mediated by texts (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000). Opposed to this model is the *autonomous model of literacy*, taken as the ability to interpret written technical texts as an outcome of independent skills (Luke & Freebody, 1999; Gee, 2005). According to this perspective, the subject (but not the procedures or the contents) is the centre of all learning. He/she has several experiences and identities, motivation, personal interests and plans for the future.

The RVCC recognised learning and competences developed throughout life after adults had reflected

upon them. It was supported by a retrospective view of adults' ways of living and experiences. This allowed the identification of knowledge and competences that were the outcome of life experiences. As long as the confrontation between experiences was also a confrontation with the personal identity of the subjects the RVCC had to be thought of according to a rationale of formal valuation of learning already achieved (and the devaluation of competences that were only established when the RVCC started). The RVCC was based on an individual rationale of self-evaluation, albeit hetero-regulated, of self-estimation that could be considered as the starting point for the competence validation phase, in which the learning and competences that were outcomes of the recognition phase were validated. The adults' learning was thus given a formal character. Knowledge and competences were first identified and compared with the knowledge and competences set out in a Key-Competences Reference¹ (Alonso et al., 2002 and Gomes, 2006); next, legal value was given to learning experiences (Ministério da Educação, 2005).

We may say that the RVCC is supported by literacy practices because of the production by adults of oral and written life stories. While the RVCC was generally framed by an understanding of learning and competences according to the ideological model of literacy, in terms of specifically literacy practices some tensions could be identified. On the one hand, a situated perspective of the individual, living and acting in contexts that were meaningful for him/herself and learning as a continuous process makes the RVCC a device structured by the *ideological model of literacy*. However, in the RVCC, literacy (taken as a set of linguistic and cognitive skills) just values the communicative competence and the normative orientation of the uses of language. According to this perspective, literacy in the RVCC was a procedure of the *autonomous model of literacy*. This meant that vernacular practices of daily life that served real aims could be devalued, unlike dominant practices that were more formally structured (Castro & Laranjeira, 2009; Barton & Hamilton, 2007).

On the one hand, ideologically relevant social analysis might be applied to the RVCC, emphasising its instrumental character, aimed at training people. On the other hand, it could be argued that the RVCC helped to develop an autonomous, critical subject, able to interpret, transform and build new knowledge (Fingeret, 1990; Lima, 2007). As a consequence, we believe it is important to discuss (dis)articulations on which the development of literate subjects is made. Particularly with respect to the acquisition modes of social languages that were valued by people, in which literacy practices might be considered a *passport to citizenship* (Lucio-Villegas, 2007), another issue had to be considered. This issue concerned to the continuities, the discontinuities and the hybridization of practices and competences that adults brought to the RVCC and those that occurred and were mobilized during the course of the programme.

¹ We held the Reference to be a normative instrument for the recognition of prior learning and an instrument that legitimized education, training practices and literacy practices. As argued by Castro and Laranjeira (2007/2008: 97), the Reference was 'materialization of a first level of policy discourse within the pedagogic field, not only as a relevant factor for the delimitation of the universe of reference of pedagogical actions – of "recognition" and of "adult education" - , but also as a source for training professionals who work in the field of adult education'.

Literacy could not be considered as the same thing in all contexts. Several literacies could be found in various domains of life, with each one mobilising a social language and a specific identity. The New Opportunities Centres² were the relevant context for literacy and they were interesting places for studying changes in the adult subjects' identities and language when they attended the RVCC. These changes led to the emergence of a new Discourse on adults' lives. Here, we agree that the RVCC could involve learning as an outcome of literacy practices used when performing tasks and writing the portfolio. As a result the RVCC involved changes in literacy skills and in the way adults lead to at themselves and the world.

What were the most relevant literacy practices in the RVCC? How did they foster a re-construction of these subjects' identities? How were adults represented in relation to literacy practices by those who managed the New Opportunities Centres (NOCs), the coordinators of NOCs? What changes did these coordinators stress? These were questions for the research project on which this paper is based. How were practices involving the use of written texts seen by NOCs' coordinators? This was the question that underpinned the debate that is unfolded in this paper. This debate refers to changes in adults' identities, according to the NOCs' coordinators' representations. The first part of this paper sets out the methods adopted. Then NOCs' coordinators' discourses are analysed. Specific attention is given to the procedure on which the RVCC was based, i.e. the pedagogical practices and literacy understandings involved. The last part of this paper discusses the changes indicated by NOCs' coordinators in relation to adults' literacy practices.

Adults and literacy practices: the New Opportunities Centres' coordinators' insights

The data discussed in this paper are the representations of NOCs' coordinators on changes in the adults' literacy practices. These data were collected in a research project designed to understand changes in the literate identities of adults involved in RVCC that allowed them to obtain a basic school education certification. Nine semi-structured interviews to NOCs' coordinators were conducted between March and June 2011³. Topics covered included: i) the characterisation of NOCs⁴, and ii) the ways these Centres were developing the RVCC with respect to strategies chosen and instruments

2 The New Opportunities Centres were the organizations that locally implemented the adult education and training policy, i.e. the RVCC.

3 The New Opportunities Centres' coordinators were interviewed under a research project called 'Changing lives' (*A Vida em Mudança. A Literacia na Educação de Adultos*) funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) - research project PTDC/CPE-CED/105258/2008. These coordinators were responsible for Centres in the Braga region which formed the sample selected for the project.

4 New Opportunities Centres were 'projects' of larger institutions that could be State run, private enterprises or non-governmental organizations. They were established after the submission of applications. Due to the ambiguous organizational character of NOCs, the interviews were conducted in light of the link established with organizations through which the Centres were set up (in particular the reason why the organizations had decided to create such centres, and the educational programme and rules of the said organizations and the NOCs).

used to identify and certify adults' competences. Three NOCs' coordinators' representations of adults' literacy are discussed in this paper, in particular their understanding of the link between adult education, reading and writing⁵. We also set out to interpret the NOCs' coordinators's representations on adopted literacy practices and changes occurred in adults' literacy lives.

Identity transformations: perspectives on changes

The RVCC emphasises learning in non-formal education contexts. It places value and validity on knowledge and competences acquired in a wide range of situations. The RVCC thus believes that 'people learn with life, with experience, within a net of relationships' (Lima, 2007:60). The subject was understood to be the core of the RVCC, having competences and experiences that cannot be detached from the contexts in which knowledge and skills are developed. The RVCC programme was based on an understanding of learning and competences structured by the *ideological model of literacy*. Reading and writing are situated and complex practices. However, reading and writing representations shared by NOCs coordinators have characteristics of the *autonomous model of literacy* owing to the stress on psychological skills used and under development. These two models could be identified in NOCs' coordinators discourses on the learning pathways developed by adults. Interviewees tended to emphasize the lack of competences, a characteristic of the *autonomous model of literacy*, when referring to deficits presented by adults:

We notice that people do not relate things (...), they are not used to reasoning with respect to relationships between things... they is a clear lack of reasoning. (...) They do not perceive what is going on in the world, they do not see changes occurring. (...) Of course they have had very interesting experiences, but it is very difficult for them to synthesize, to make links between things... they just have things stored in their heads [E(C)1].

People are not systematic and organized. They always need someone else to organize things for them, a continuous monitoring. These people are different from us [E(C)2].

These two extracts betray a reductionist representation of how adults are 'made up', given that they were not socialised according to prevailing social and cultural practices. This understanding of adult identities was quite surprising, especially considering that the RVCC was a process for recognising and validating knowledge and skills acquired throughout life. When considering the literacy practices developed by adults or children in formal education contexts such as school it is important to remember that the different domains of life are based upon different literacies. These domains embrace modes

⁵ Three of the nine interviews were chosen for the analysis reported in this paper. This was because the discourses of these coordinators represented three different views of RVCC as a form of provision of adult education and training. These were the coordinators of three non-governmental organizations involved in adult education in the last twenty years. However, even though they belonged to organizations that stressed different aims for adult education, as mentioned later on in this paper, their understanding of literacy and identity changes related to literacy practices did not differ much.

that are socially preferred and legitimised for giving meaning to written texts, different ways of using these texts and also different ways of referring to these texts (Dionísio & Castro, 2007/2008; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). According to NOCs' coordinators' representations, the RVCC involves a plurality of tasks, some of which could also be found in formal education contexts:

In the RVCC we have to note that quite some time ago we were asking people to read a book. Well, in fact it is compulsory to read a classic book [E(C)3].

There is something that we have been doing here which is reading. In the RVCC that gives a basic education or secondary education certification, we are promoting this dynamic of reading a book. (...) Afterwards, people write a synthesis of the book read, to oblige them to systematize... [E(C)1].

Some practices concerning the use of texts, vernacular practices because they occurred on a daily basis, were not regulated by formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions (Barton, 1994). These practices could even be regarded as illegitimate by NOCs' coordinators. Of these, not reading books was stressed, an idea opposed to the idea that adults should have 'reading habits':

We always try to motivate adults (...) to have a reading habit. (...) Because many of them are resuming this habit that they had lost, others have started to read, haven't they? In this case, it is not a habit, it is a starting of a process of reading, because they didn't used to read at all. When they attended school, they were forced to read what had to be read; but for many years they didn't read anything, except these magazines with very poor articles that you can find easily in any place, especially in shopping centres [E(C)3].

According to the NOCs' coordinators it was clear that reading a book was a trait of a literate identity. It was also evident that the interviewees believed that reading skills could be learned by reading books, preferably classic books. In these circumstances, adults' experiences with the variety of texts available in contemporary societies were devalued. Therefore, the cultural modes of using the written language that adults used regularly and that shaped the literacy events were deprecated. Furthermore, NOCs' coordinators all felt that the written component of texts was developed mainly through reading classic books, dominant texts. Vernacular texts, such as the magazines with very poor articles, even if interesting and valuable for the development of literacy skills were undervalued:

We are insisting on literature, on books (...). Why? Because we noticed adults have a huge difficulty in expressing themselves orally or in writing; so we thought of adding some value to the RVCC and of facilitating the writing of Reflective Learning Portfolios [E(C)1].

Factors concerning formal education and training attended were the basis of this understanding of literacy shared by the NOCs' coordinators. This understanding was forged in Portuguese classes in school, also influenced by readings, experiences, beliefs, values, shared by society (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge & Tusting, 2007). Surprisingly, these concerns with 'reading classic books' promoted

practices that were found in all the Centres where the data were collected for the study. Even if this task of reading a book was not suggested either by the government department in charge of adopting the adult education and training policy or the RVCC, uniformity in these reading practices could be noticed. In addition, normalisation occurred when reading involved obligatory tasks adults were asked to perform to promote a 'real' understanding of what they had read, such as the synthesis of the story told in the book, just as pupils were asked to do in regular schools.

The analysis of the interviewees' discourses revealed a clear contradiction between that the officially stated purpose of the RVCC – a process of recognition of prior learning acquired throughout life, covered by the characteristics of the ideological model of literacy – and the pedagogic work accomplished in New Opportunities Centres (NOCs), in the context of the *autonomous model of literacy*, according to an understanding of literacy based on measurable skills, skills that could be learned by teaching and independent of contexts in which they were developed and used.

Changes in identities

The changes in the relationship between subjects and the literacy practices developed while attending the RVCC (practices that were identified and declared by the NOCs' coordinators interviewed) were found to be mainly ideological, related to the domain of the self, including attitudes, beliefs and behaviours:

I believe that there is a significant improvement in the physical behaviour of people, how people are and how they relate to other people... In my opinion, it is the most relevant improvement, where a development can be found... but nothing more than that [E(C)1].

Although ideological transformations may be indicated as the main impacts of RVCC, changes of an autonomous kind, focused on the acquisition of new knowledge and the enlargement of adults' cultural capital, were also mentioned by the NOCs' coordinators:

They learn to use the computer, they socialize with other adults, get to know new people and learn... Well, they also read more, write more often and that's it [E(C)2].

Interestingly, the changes identified by the NOCs' coordinators interviewed about the relation between subjects and literacy were dissociated from their own representations of education for promoting reading and writing. Even when stressing the importance of developing formal contents, which were declared pedagogical practices in the NOCs, the coordinators often pointed out transformations in the adults' identities and their awakening to new Discourses:

The RVCC doesn't directly develop new competences [of reading and writing]. The RVCC involves the acquisition of new behaviour. Behaviour concerning... how people communicate

with one another. There is clearly a development. People lose their inhibitions. People are usually not used to... many adults are not used to... except for the relationship with bosses, people are not used to communicating in formal contexts [E(C)1].

On the one hand, the way the Coordinators viewed the changes in relationships of adults in relation to literacy seemed to be detached from the way they viewed education for reading and writing. On the other hand, the changes they pointed out when referring to adults' literacy skills were appropriate to the principles and aims of the RVCC.

Final thoughts

Each person embodies a unique combination of practices and identities that are the outcome of various life experiences. It is through their involvement in diverse social practices in different life contexts that subjects develop new skills and learn new ways to handle written texts. Beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and values concerned with what can be said or done, and according to which resources, are also aspects related to these contexts. Even if we assume that people's participation in different situations that generate learning unleashes new modes of having access to, using and valuing texts, it is important to realise that generally only literacy practices developed in school education are thought valid and legitimate. This means that people's textual experiences gained from daily practices are often devalued and forgotten; very often, these are determinant practices that respond to social requirements.

Since the RVCC transformed the subjects' relationship with literacy, it is also an interesting place to understand the changes occurring in the literacy domain with adults. Because 'people's current practices are shaped by their life history' (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge & Tusting, 2007: 18), we decided to analyse key factors associated with representations declared by New Opportunities Centres' coordinators. These factors involved discourses not only on teaching and learning but also on the place of literacy practices in RVCC. The Coordinators expressed a conservative view on education for reading and writing, focused on valuing technical competences to decodify written texts – characteristics of the *autonomous model of literacy* – but they also identified changes in identities of subjects that went far beyond a simple improvement of grammatical, correctly written sentences. In fact they indicated changes in the literacy life of adults, mostly related to the self, such as self-confidence and self-esteem that could have a relevant impact in social environments. In addition, the changes identified by the NOCs' Coordinators seemed to be further from their own representations on reading and writing. These practices tended to be reduced to links to social processes (and not so much to individual characteristics), which was in fact a question debated in this paper.

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