

**Proceedings of the first meeting of the ESREA Research
Network**

***“Between Global and Local:
Adult Learning and Development”***

20 – 22 October 2006

University of Algarve, Faro, Portugal



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The proceedings were edited with the kind support of:



**UNIVERSITY OF LOWER SILESIA
OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT
OF EDUCATION IN WROCLAW**

FCT **Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia**

MINISTÉRIO DA CIÊNCIA, TECNOLOGIA E ENSINO SUPERIOR Portugal

Published by:

Universidade do Algarve, Faro, 2006

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ISBN: 972-9341-52-4

ISBN (13 digits): 978-972-9341-52-6

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Fragoso A., Lucio-Villegas E. and Kurantowicz E. <i>Between global and local: adult learning and development</i> | 1 |
| Martin I. and Shaw M. <i>Developing the 'community' dimension of learning: three conceptual frameworks</i> | 11 |
| Ligus R. <i>Teachers as leaders of local development? Between traditional and local myths of leadership</i> | 17 |
| Johnston R. <i>Community development for a change: reviewing different models</i> | 27 |
| López Górriz I. <i>La transformation des personnes adultes à travers la participation: un apprentissage social, existentiel et chercheur</i> | 39 |
| Castro R., Sancho A. and Guimarães P. <i>Adult education in Portugal. Different scenarios and distinct ways of searching for learning and development</i> | 49 |
| Veloso E. <i>The elderly, development and education, which relationships?</i> | 69 |
| Crowther J. and Hemmi A. <i>Social learning for social change: the role of information and communication technologies in social movements</i> . | 77 |
| Zientek M. <i>Lifelong learning and human development among special kind of participants – prospective Polish migrant workers – a micro-scale analyze in local community (a case study in Danish temporary - job recruitment company located in Poland)</i> | 89 |
| Lucio-Villegas E. <i>Reflections on some experiences of local development in Andalusia (Spain)</i> | 93 |
| Kurantowicz E. <i>Micro development: among localisation, de-localisation and re-localisation processes in the perspective of Polish social and political transformations</i> | 107 |
| Shaw M. <i>Higher and community education</i> | 119 |
| Rose A. and Atkin C. <i>Family literacy programmes: a comparative European perspective of local and global</i> | 129 |
| Jurado M. D. <i>Le journal comme un outil d'aide à la transformation de l'acteur social</i> | 141 |
| Andruske C. <i>"Development" between the margins: self-directed learning as resistance</i> | 159 |
| Verschelden G., De Droogh L. and Bouverne-De Bie M. <i>Community development and adult learning: What kind of citizenship as perspective?</i> | 175 |
| Fragoso A., Lucio-Villegas E. <i>Where to go from here? An essay on local participatory development between militancy and mediation</i> | 189 |
| Francisco M. L. <i>Ecoimmigration's contribution for local development</i> | 199 |

ADULT EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL. DIFFERENT SCENARIOS AND DISTINCT WAYS OF SEARCHING FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper follows on from the authors' participation in a project aimed at characterising the practices developed in several European countries called *Developing Local Learning Centres and Learning Partnerships as Part of Member States Targets for Reaching the Lisbon Goals in the Field of Education and Training. A Study of the Current Situation* (Leiden University, 2005). We now aim to go further as regards the characterisation of the contexts and practices described at the time, seeking to clarify certain issues regarding the history of the organisations involved, the education and training policies either tacitly or explicitly endorsed, the organisational structures adopted and the preferred principles and forms of action. We shall start by pointing out some aspects of adult education policies which have been adopted in the past three decades in Portugal and on the main features and goals of the research; the analysis and discussion of the main results make up another part of the paper, which concludes with a review of the main aspects examined.

Adult education in Portugal: a general overview of intermittent and disconnected of public policies and distinct State funded forms of provision

The belated acknowledgment of adult education as a field of specialised practices has meant that adult education policies in Portugal have followed a sinuous path from the instauration of democracy on 25 April 1974 to the present time, with isolated and piecemeal approaches, which only on rare occasions have actually had a bearing on each other. By analysing, albeit briefly, the policies developed over the last thirty years, it will become clear that although there were interventions that fostered the development of certain fields, the approach was partial, fragmentary and sectorial (Melo, Lima & Almeida, 2002). Formal education, namely evening classes for adults, and literacy and popular education campaigns were particularly in the foreground between 1974 and 1976 (Melo & Benavente, 1978); basic education, understood as literacy programmes, classes aimed at completing compulsory schooling and development actions promoted by cultural and recreation associations were encompassed in the National Plan for Adult Literacy and Basic Education (Ministério da Educação, 1979); second-chance¹¹ education and out-of-school education gained more weight in the Education Act (Law nr. 46/86 of October 14); between 1989 and 1994 the Programme for the Educational Development of Portugal through Subprogramme 3 - Adult Education - made substantial provision for second-chance schooling (for those who hadn't completed compulsory education) linked to an initial vocational qualification (Almeida *et al.*, 1995) as well as for the development of vocationally-oriented second-chance basic education; adult education and training courses, skills recognition, validation and certification processes along with the *S@ber+* actions are initiatives included in the Programme for the Development and Expansion of Adult

¹¹ By second-chance basic education we mean evening classes of adults in order to accomplish compulsory education (9 year of school in Portugal).

Education and Training 1999-2006 (cf. Melo *et al.*)¹² which have taken centre stage recently.

Within the current framework, there are three modalities in the field of adult education which have become especially relevant given the prominence assigned to them by the main educational policies: second-chance, out-of-school education, and adult education and training courses. These actions are essentially geared towards the certification of school attainment as well as professional certification but are not alone in a field characterised by diversity and comprising many other initiatives of varying features which are, however, neither well-known nor widely recognised socially.

Second-chance basic and secondary education, created by the 1986 Education Act, is above all a second-chance at education for individuals who either did not complete compulsory schooling at the age of 16 or are over 18 and did not finish post-compulsory education. It is aimed at eradicating illiteracy and promoting formal education, conferring the same diplomas and certificates as the regular education system while devising and developing access paths, syllabi and methodologies which take into account the characteristics of the students they are meant for (based on age, life experience and level of knowledge). Seeking to address the educational asymmetries among the Portuguese population, this modality needs to be flexible and diversified in terms of organisation and implementation, interspersed over time and alternating as regards learning venues. The curricula are defined based on the individual abilities/skills to be developed at the various levels and bearing in mind the different characteristics and needs of the adults.

Out-of-school education is another modality of education which is overseen by the Ministry of Education. Supplementary in nature, in the sense that it seeks to make up for a lack of formal education, it is aimed at fostering the development of knowledge and skills through either formal or non-formal actions, catering essentially for individuals who did not complete compulsory schooling. It fits into a *éducation permanente* perspective, focusing on global and continuous educational action with a view to adopting and developing attitudes, values and competencies that promote adults' personal development and enable them to take on their different social roles adequately. Out-of-school education seeks to cover the following points: the elimination of literal and functional illiteracy; the promotion of equal educational and training opportunities for those who did not attend or dropped out of school, by means of adult literacy and basic training programmes; the development of solidarity attitudes and community engagement; the promotion of retraining and enhancement of professional skills as a means to prepare for employment; the development of technological skills and technical know-how to better adapt to the changes that are typical of contemporary societies; creative use of leisure-time through cultural activities.

These initiatives differ from second-chance education not only due to the wide range of programmes and subject matter but also to the fact that they are not aimed at conferring a school certification. They may be carried out either within cultural extension programmes of the school system or outside it, employing specific educational technologies. They may be implemented by a wide variety of organisations, such as Ministry of Education agencies, local government bodies, popular education associations,

¹² Within this context, only rarely did the various adult education areas share a common approach. Of these rare instances one may highlight Law nr. 46/86 of October 14, which sought to connect second-chance education to out-of-school education. However, due to the resources made available and to the number of implemented actions to date, this attempt did not succeed in raising the issue's profile (cf. Sancho, 1993; Pinto, Matos & Rothes, 1998; Silva & Rothes, 1998; e Melo, Lima & Almeida, 2002, among others).

cultural and recreation associations, student and youth groups, trade unions, workers' committees, civic and confessional organisations, among others, thereby seeking to get civil society involved in education and in raising the population's levels of education. This modality takes on an important role in promoting equal opportunities for young people and adults to have access to and success in education by making the diversity of educational alternatives widely available and by ensuring the subsystem meets the needs, interests and characteristics of the adults and their local environment.

Despite the importance of second-chance education and out-of-school education in the adult education sector, especially as regards its national coverage, various studies have suggested there are shortcomings and constraints to these types of provision, namely in what second-chance education is concerned. Among those mentioned are the complexity of this subsystem, the excessive formalisation as revealed by its rigid organisational structure and by a primary concern for a younger population with low levels of educational attainment rather than adults, particularly visible in the case of second-chance basic education (Sancho, 1993; Esteves, 1996; Silva & Rothes, 1998; Pinto, Matos & Rothes, 1998). In fact, having in mind these shortcomings and constraints, a revision of second-chance education was proposed (Ministério da Educação, 2003) but was not concluded. However, we believe that there will soon be significant changes to both of these modalities, within the framework of the New Opportunities Programme (*Programa Novas Oportunidades*) announced in 2005 for the next coming years.

In the late 1990s, against a backdrop of European Union guidelines laid down in several documents (cf. European Commission, 1994, 1995 and 1996, among others) and government-established objectives (cf. programmes of the XIII, XIV and XVII Constitutional Governments) pursuing the development of the Information and Knowledge Society and seeking closer proximity between education and training, new policies were implemented that entailed the promotion of different types of public provision with a view to re-launching adult education (Melo *et al.*, 2001). Particularly relevant among these¹³ are the Adult Education and Training Courses (EFA). These courses comprise initiatives that seek to bolster lifelong education and training and stemmed from the articulation between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Solidarity, being under the auspices of the National Adult Education and Training Agency until its extinction in 2002 when they fell under the Directorate-General for Vocational Training. The courses, based on a curricular organisation, on specific subject matter and on a flexible pedagogic structure, provide integrated education and training to people over the age of 18 with low qualifications, especially to those who did not complete compulsory education thereby seeking to contribute to reducing the number of adults with low school and vocational qualifications.

These actions seek to incorporate various mechanisms, namely the key competency benchmarks (cf. ANEFA 2002), the procedure for recognition and validation of skills acquired in both formal and non-formal learning situations as well as modular and integrated training paths for the general and vocational training components of the courses. The claim to partake of the constructivist perspective on curriculum development and trainee and trainer learning, as well as the option for an open and flexible pedagogic and organisational framework are aspects that merit highlighting. In this context, pedagogic

¹³ In addition to the Adult Education and Training Courses, the S@ber+ Programme comprised the Skills Recognition, Validation and Certification (RVCC), the S@ber+ Actions, among other initiatives.

assessment is supposed to be essentially formative, taking place throughout the training process and being mainly qualitative and informative¹⁴.

EFA courses may be implemented by a variety of training bodies, namely local government bodies, companies, trade unions, cultural, municipal, local development and trade/industrial associations, non-profit making private institutions, vocational training centres or schools. Local partnerships may be triggered by the courses due to the proximity between the promoting bodies and the populations and the knowledge of the conditions, resources, needs and interests of the people and the communities.

On the whole, the evaluation the official agencies have made of these courses is favourable, with mention being made of “a positive appraisal of a heterogeneous reality” (Ávila, 2004). There are, however, some tensions that merit pointing out. There is an uneven geographical distribution of these courses, with the number of actions implemented in the North being more significant than in any other region. Furthermore, these courses tend to preferably target certain groups: women, unemployed adults and those regarded as underprivileged predominate, while many other groups, whose inclusion would be desirable, are excluded. This experience has become associated with the consolidation of an innovative training model that breaks away from the more traditional school-based approaches and is based on key competencies and on the articulation between general and vocational training. Another aspect which is highlighted by participants is the innovative nature of the relationship established between the trainers, within the context of the training team, and between the trainers and trainees (cf. Couceiro & Patrocínio, 2002; Rothes, 2003; Oliveira, 2003).

Adult education practices are not confined to second-chance education, out-of-school education and EFA courses. Other modalities of adult education are to be found nowadays. Due to the absence of a regulatory legal framework and the variety of agencies, target groups, mechanisms and intervention contexts, these actions have had heterogeneous development processes, in many cases centred on the actions themselves, “(...) learning to know themselves, to know reality and to transform it” (Canário, 1999:65). The pertinence of many of these actions derives from the fact that they are designed to address problems experienced locally which, in turn, encourages local actors to get more involved in building what is hoped will be more effective solutions. Thus, on many occasions, these initiatives enable the actors to become more aware of their social and educational situation and are often building blocks for further and more autonomous actions (*Ibid.*).

Getting to know adult education and training practices and modalities: a strategy

The field of adult education practices is admittedly a heterogeneous one, with practices varying considerably depending on the settings they are developed in, the subjects carrying them out, the objectives they pursue, the pedagogical mechanisms that structure them and the spatial and temporal constraints that characterise them. To a certain extent, one may say that heterogeneity is an inherent feature of the field. The multimodal nature of the adult education practices and the loosely-knit organic structure of the field have had several effects, of which two may be pointed out: a lack of acknowledgment – in some cases self-acknowledgement - of some of the adult education practices and certain

¹⁴ When successfully completed, the Adult Education and Training Courses confer a double certification: academic and vocational, which may be level B1 (equivalent to 4th year of schooling and to the level 1 vocational training certificate); level B2 (equivalent to 6th year of schooling and to the level 1 vocational training certificate); level B3 (equivalent to 9th year of schooling and to level 2 vocational training certificate).

types and modalities being favoured at the expense of others. Experiments that test new possibilities, as well as others with potential to innovate and have an effective local impact often end up being suppressed due to the combination of these two effects.

The diversity of practices and the low degree of institutionalisation that characterises many of them have prompted not only the coining of several terms to designate the initiatives being carried out, but also the expansion of the actual representations that the actors have of the initiatives implemented. Moreover, there has been a corresponding increase in the organisational arrangements that sustain them, clearly visible in the variety of agencies that promote adult education programmes and in the different mechanisms they resort to as regards pedagogical methods, techniques and forms of evaluation (cf. Lima, 2006; Canário, 1999 and Canário & Cabrita, 2005; Bélanger & Federighi, 2000 and Foley, 2004, among others). In this context, there are competing discursive formations that seek to determine what “counts” and what “does not count” as adult education. The equivalence between adult education and vocational training, which can currently be found in the discourse of several individuals and agencies, bears witness to the tensions in the field and to the trend towards making it the main formation.

It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to contribute towards the diagnosis of the field of adult education practices by carefully looking at the variety of experiences and attempting not only to be sensitive to this diversity but also to give it visibility. We propose to analyse the practices and the concepts identified in three contexts where adult education programmes are carried out. By selecting these cases, we are not in any way suggesting that we are seeking to legitimise them or are supportive of them. Our main concern has always been to question, to understand and to interpret both the practices and the contexts in which they have been carried out.

Our study focuses on some of the public forms of provision. We will be describing formal and non-formal, school and out-of-school offers that take place in three specific contexts, all of which in the North of Portugal, namely in the counties of Famalicão, Guimarães and Arcos de Valdevez, and in an urban setting: a local coordination unit for second-chance and out-of-school education, hereinafter referred to as the *unit*; a private non-profit making association, the *association*; and a health centre, the *centre*. Despite the variety of programmes made available to adults nowadays, these three cases were chosen due to the fact that two of them fit into the public education and training policies catering preferably for adults. In contrast, the third one, the *centre*, provides alternative forms of education, namely health education, which potentially involve other ways of thinking and acting, in educational terms, for and with adults.

The study will seek to compare the contexts and modalities as regards duration and location, objectives and the subject matter of the education and training actions, the target groups (young people and/or adults), organisational patterns and the social as well as individual impact. The comparison will alternatively highlight what is similar within the diversity (common features, regularities) and what is discontinuous and unique. As can be gathered from what was stated previously, there has been no concern in having these cases viewed as “samples“, with an option being clearly made for a multi-case methodology.

We shall now present and discuss the results obtained, looking for distinctive and common aspects which may be regarded, albeit provisionally, as identifying elements of contemporary adult education practices in Portugal, broadly considered. Focusing first of all on the history and the structures, searching for the invariable as well as the variations, our analytical endeavour will then consider the pedagogical approaches, the methods, the

mechanisms and the instruments which were adopted so as to pinpoint the elements of continuity/discontinuity in relation to identical dimensions in other contexts and practices.

Adult education settings

History, structure and resources

The framework of policies, programmes and initiatives presented above covers a high number of adult education actions that are currently developed in Portugal. However, this does not mean that all actions undertaken are shaped by it or that those which are developed within it do not reinterpret some of its guidelines. It is thus our assumption that there are tensions and contradictions between guidelines and practices which merit analysis, and one of the main objectives of this study is precisely to explore this possibility.

Despite the fact that the three agencies operate in different contexts, target distinct groups and adopt diverse organisational principles, they do have some elements in common. For instance, they all have multiple intervention contexts that go beyond the area where the organisation is located and they are involved in networks of organisations geared towards the development of educational actions.

The agencies are located in urban settings; however their range of action usually goes beyond their local area as they develop actions in other locations in collaboration with other public or private institutions. In some cases, the educational initiatives cover the whole county, or even areas outside it. It is thus a mode of operation that is centralised as regards decision-making, planning, coordination and evaluation, but decentralised when it comes to intervention venues, which seems to indicate that being close to the people the initiatives are addressed to is a matter of concern. There is an attempt to involve young people and adults that live or work far from the agencies' offices, with a view to include those who might otherwise be excluded due to the physical distance.

Another common practice is the setting up of partnerships that suggest more shared, more informed and more sustained forms of intervention. These partnerships, which may be of a technical-scientific nature, as is the case of the training of trainers, are set up at different stages, ranging from the needs analysis phase to the actual implementation of the actions, thereby producing more effective and significant results in the design, monitoring, and evaluation phases of the activities and projects.

These partnerships may be established with public bodies, such as local government, nursery schools, schools, job centres, social security centres, etc., and private charitable institutions, associations, cooperatives, etc. The *unit*, for instance, has seen its ability to operate in the field of out-of-school education bolstered as a result of its cooperation with the city hall. This cooperation enables it to offer a wider and more diversified range of courses besides ensuring administrative support and the payment of certain expenses, such as the transportation of students attending the second-chance basic (1st and 2nd cycles) education courses. This cooperation is regarded as essential both for the development of such a high number of actions and for the involvement of the adults in the learning activities. Although current legislation makes provision for this type of partnership by stating that local government is responsible for paying certain expenses deriving from the implementation of basic education programmes, the fact of the matter is that this support is much more significant in this county than in many others, to the point that it is considered to be an exceptional case in the North of Portugal.

In the case of the *centre*, the partnerships established with both the city hall and the social security centre have made it easier to identify and involve other groups besides the ones primarily targeted for health education. As a result, a higher number of people are engaged in the initiatives and there are also tend to be more regular and more systematic actions.

Of the three institutions studied, the *association* best demonstrates the importance of this type of articulation. In fact, the development of partnerships seems to be one of the *association's* most relevant objectives due to the fact that increasingly sophisticated strategies are required to ensure that the target groups get effectively involved in the initiatives. In addition to this, the funding provided by the programmes that sustain these initiatives often depends on the organisations' ability to work together with other institutions. The *association* itself came into being as a result of the strengthening of a partnership.

The [association] was set up when an association of local governments (...) commissioned company X to draw up the first strategic plan for [the region] which would set out the objectives for the development of the region for the duration of Community Support Framework II. One of the conclusions of the strategic plan was the absence of a body operating in the areas of development (...). The association of local governments had the idea, and it was taken up by five purpose-driven young people looking for their first job who had indirectly cooperated with the association before on other projects. An application was made to the Employment Initiative (...) which provided a small amount of money to get the association started. (Interview A3)

To sum up, the three agencies share some common features, namely the way they have integrated into their respective region and the manner in which they have participated in training networks. Nevertheless, there are also some significant differences. They are different as regards their legal status, the way they were set up, their guiding principles, their framework for action, their structure, the autonomy they have to develop actions, their sources of funding as well as their human resources. The importance of developing adult education in the shape of basic second-chance education and out-of-school education was the driving force behind the creation of the *unit*, the provision of health care was the reason for setting up the *centre*, while the *association* was established to promote local development. The differences as regards the origins of the three organisations are in line with the objectives and main activities each of them carries out.

The structure of the three organisations reflects the different general frameworks they are each a part of, as well as the differing nature of their mission. The *unit* and the *centre* have management boards, administrative and support services which are practically the same as the ones to be found in similar organisations as they are all regulated by the legislation in force. As for the *association*, the administrative and support services are set up, replaced and /or extinguished according to the number and the nature of the actions being undertaken. At one point, there was a socioeconomic consultancy department as well as a cooperation department but when this study was carried out they no longer existed and the services they provided have been taken over by other departments that have been set up or become more active, in the meantime.

The high degree of fluidity and of flexibility in terms of the structure of the *association* amounts to a higher autonomy in terms of action. The *unit* and the *centre*, on

the other hand, are public bodies that depend on State organs, namely the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, at various levels (general management, human resources management and funding), therefore they only have a relative degree of autonomy.

They are regarded as “local services” of the Regional Directorate of Education, through the Educational Area Coordination Office, in the case of *the unit* and of the Regional Directorate of Health, through the Regional Health Administration, in the case of the *centre*. The *centre* is described as being *second-generation*, based on an integrated services model with a maternity and inpatient services for children in addition to ambulatory services. This limited autonomy is regarded as constraining the possibilities for intervention with regard to the problems and needs identified, making the decision-making and implementation processes more complex and time-consuming. The constraints seem to be stronger in the case of the *unit*; although it is a legally recognised local education organisation, there are no specific regulations pertaining to its functioning, which has led the head of the unit to admitting “(...) [it is] just a local service. [It is] not even a decentralised service, because no competences have been delegated” (Interview B9). In contrast, as mentioned before, the autonomy enjoyed by the *association* has enabled it to pursue distinct guiding objectives and forms of intervention and operation. As a result of these facts, the profile of the three agencies as regards the actions they undertake does not coincide: both the *unit* and the *centre* display some regularity in terms of the type of interventions they promote; their main initiatives, namely the development of out-of-school education in one case and the promotion of health care in the other, are systematic and possess identical characteristics which enables them to be socially recognised as fundamental services in the counties where they are located. The *association* seems to have a more changeable status, which is also due to the fact that its most emblematic initiatives have varied, depending above all on the social policies in force as well as on the support programmes made available at each point in time by the Portuguese State and the European Union. This has meant that locally the *association* possesses a rather diffuse and complex status, at times being identified as a school or training centre, while on other occasions as a social security administrative service.

Regularities and singularities in pedagogic work

Having been set up at different moments in time and, therefore, in tune with public social policies that are not necessarily convergent, these organisations have simultaneously regular and distinctive ways of conceiving and developing their practices which are either reflected or reinterpreted in their education and training initiatives.

In order to clarify the import of such regularities and differences, one has to consider the characteristics of the initiatives that were promoted in areas such as adult education and training, information and awareness-raising, non-formal education and out-of-school education, with regard to i) the manner and the setting in which they are undertaken; ii) their objectives and subject matter; iii) the forms of organisation and evaluation adopted; iv) the target groups involved and the individual and social impacts the actions have.

Information and awareness-raising initiatives: the importance of both systematic and experimental approaches

Falling into this category are the prevention and awareness-raising actions organised by the *centre* on specific health, hygiene and safety topics, based on guidelines from the Ministry of Health and the social network or on the Social Integration Income rules. Included, too, are the initiatives promoted by the *unit* to publicise its second-chance education and out-of-school education courses, as well as the actions undertaken by the *association* in connection with its adult education and training or vocational training initiatives. These actions take on various shapes, which may involve presenting motives or reasons underlying the action, presenting specific informational content, demonstrating procedures so as to show how to perform a certain task in a certain set of circumstances but also analysing and interpreting in the case of actions that involve debating and discussing relevant themes. Initiatives of this type have a bearing on a wide variety of target groups with their individual and social impacts being difficult to gauge. They take place in very different settings, are conducted in facilities that serve educational purposes to a varying degree, involve varying numbers of people and have a structure of varying flexibility.

Although many of these actions are very loosely structured, in the case of some of the information and awareness-raising initiatives, efforts were made to coordinate with events organised by the same or other organisations. The *centre*, for instance, took advantage of the commemoration of World Health Day to carry out various activities, within the framework of its 2005 project “Get moving, for your health’s sake”: a variety of street animation activities, visits to schools, public sessions for parents and for children aimed at passing on information about healthy practices which are easily recognisable by the local populations, namely adults:

Here there are problems with diabetes and obesity which impact on other aspects of health – rheumatism, for example- and we think the population has a pace... we just do not see people walking.... In fact, they think physical exercise is done at work. I work and so there’s nothing else I need to do. And I work in agriculture and in this line of work you really get worn out. It’s just that they then aren’t able to do both. And the population is positively obese. (Interview C 18)

A common feature to all these actions is that they tend to have a low degree of articulation, since they are responses to concrete and immediate problems. Despite the fact that they are frequently carried out in collaboration with other organisations, these initiatives do have their different agendas, which frequently allows for the existence of action objectives that are not always congruent and consensual. Due to this and to the fact that they are addressed to a high but indeterminate number of people, the several information and awareness-raising initiatives we identified do not correspond to an integrated and articulated strategy. The initiatives that prevail are sporadic and often experimental in nature, carried out by teams or people who at the time commit themselves to developing them. The experimental nature of these actions must be valued. The possibility of reacting to problems experienced both by the population and by health professionals, of devising responses, of reflecting on the results and of taking further action allows for the drawing up of more adequate education modalities with a larger impact in terms of changing adult behaviour and attitudes.

Besides these actions, the *centre* organised others based on more complex forms of organisation. Among them, we can highlight those that were devised in the context of the social network with the support of different projects, namely the Health XXI Programme, that seek to lay the groundwork that will later be developed by other agencies, particularly social security offices, employment centres, schools and /or vocational training centres. These initiatives are targeted at specific groups: those socially excluded or at risk of social exclusion, among them women, the more socially disadvantaged groups or at risk of social exclusion, drug addicts and large, needy and destructured families, as well as groups affected by specific illnesses, such as diabetes and obesity. In all cases the individuals depend on others or on a variety of institutions. In this context, training actions in home economics are carried out and so are other initiatives focusing on everyday issues and problems, which seek to identify the factors that compromise people's quality of life and their productivity at work with a view to finding ways of dealing with them through the promotion of health care.

Non-formal education initiatives: the importance of favouring specific target groups

In the case of the short term training actions promoted by the *centre*, there is an obvious concern for providing them with theoretical framework. Unlike the initiatives addressed to the community at large, these actions target specific groups, according to the stage of the life cycle they are in, to the vulnerability of certain groups of patients and to the specific factors and needs that characterise them, which are, in turn, linked to the different pathologies they have. In cases when support needs to be given to relatives of patients requiring long-term hospital care, besides the informal and formal conversations which take place, training sessions are organised to inform the relatives of the care the patients need as regards hygiene and comfort. In these situations, demonstrating procedures and reflecting on the practices are extremely relevant both for the training of trainers but also for the adults participating in the initiatives:

[As regards the training of professionals] The training models we use here are training models which are not confined to the classroom. We meet here and discuss some aspects; if we have a theoretical framework or theoretical basis to support the training then we discuss it. We then go back to our daily routines, to work, and return one/two weeks later to analyse not only the difficulties posed by what we propose to do , but also the work we've done as well as what can be improved (...). With the community, in terms of elderly care for example, there are two models, one in a classroom context where we pass on the information and talk to people about health care for the elderly. Since the elderly do have these needs and because we care, they then come to our inpatient services and for about 2/3 weeks we try to get the message through about the need for special care in terms of hygiene and comfort.... (Interview C17)

In these actions as well, it is difficult to accurately gauge not only how far the objectives have been attained, but also the social and individual impacts they have had since they seek to involve a wide range of groups that often reside in areas a long way away from the organisations in question. Perhaps as a result of this, the promoters of these actions do not view evaluation, especially quantitative, as one of the most relevant tasks,

focusing instead on the quality of the information passed on by the professionals and the change in behaviour and attitudes brought about in the population.

Besides these actions, there were others of medium duration for specific target groups. They are mainly initiatives carried out in a variety of different venues, sporadic in nature, with circumscribed objectives and target groups and, in many cases, combining distinct forms of education and training. Within this framework, those which merit highlighting include the courses for family helpers and for foster families run by the *centre*, the socioeducational and socioprofessional courses and the out-of-school education initiatives promoted by the *unit*, as well as the short duration vocational training actions in sewing, educational action, geriatrics, family and community support, and installation and operation of computer systems, organised by the *association*. These actions are a response to problems and needs which were identified by the agencies themselves or by other organisations by means of needs analyses often carried out in partnership with other bodies, namely those within the social network, and with the support of national or European Union funding programmes. They try to create interaction between general objectives, such as those pertaining to personal and social development, for example, and more specific ones, often related to vocational or vocationally-oriented training. In the information actions, the format of the initiatives was varied, experimental and frequently dependent on the effort of volunteers and professionals who were, to a varying degree, prepared for them, whereas in these cases the actions are organised according to a traditional classroom training format with teacher-led instruction, demonstrations, as well as exercises and tasks carried out individually or in groups. In these cases, the individual and social impacts are frequently evaluated, and those involving changes in the trainees' lifestyles are valued, particularly when they involve employment (finding or changing jobs).

Among the actions we have been describing, which have been organised according to a criterion of increasing formalisation, there are the out-of-school education courses run by the *unit*. They are non-formal education actions carried out in different periods of time and in venues and are as such distinct from the formal education actions both in terms of their objectives and subject matter and are not aimed at conferring certification of school attainment.

These initiatives cover diverse themes ranging from sociocultural animation to supporting educational action for children, namely those with disabilities, and for young people, being meant for individuals with low school and professional qualifications¹⁵.

The thematic areas chosen for our courses depend on the agreement, interest and needs of the applicants. (...) There are no art courses; but if someone comes by and says "I would be interested in an art course", then he enrolls and if there are 15 to 20 people who show an interest as well, I try to get in touch with someone I know who is an expert in that field (...) and then try to run a course the following year with those people. There have to be a minimum number of trainees, a trainer and available funds – if the city hall provides financial support. (Interview B 20)

Despite the decrease in the number of teachers assigned to out-of-school education by the Ministry of Education and the fewer grants available for trainers, there has been a

¹⁵ When this study was carried out, there were 250 trainees on these courses.

rise in the number of adults taking part in the initiatives, which may be ascribed to the personal and social impacts. The effects most valued by the trainees are the interpersonal relationships established during the courses, which, in many cases, are maintained outside the actions, and the enhanced ability to participate in a wide range of social spheres, such as family, circle of friends and colleagues and the local community, which is often valued by the trainers and by the county coordinator.

The hybrid nature of the objectives, either focusing on promoting democracy, civic participation, etc. or bolstering the connection between education and work, is matched by the pedagogical methods selected. In the search for congruent methodologies, the trainers favour the presentation of subject matter, demonstrations, the carrying out of practical work and field trips. In many cases the choice of which to use depends on the subject matter, the trainees, their motivation and their learning pace, as we were able to ascertain in sessions we observed.

(...) the fact that the training is done in a classroom doesn't mean it should be valued more or less; it all depends on what is done in the classroom. I think we foster individual learning paces. I think we develop the personal side to a great extent, the contact with people, and the learning paces. (Interview B 21)

Formal education initiatives: the importance of certifying and qualifying

Some of the actions developed by the *unit* and by the *association* had a very high degree of formalisation. This is the case of the 1st and 2nd cycles second-chance education courses and the adult education and training courses, which we now propose to examine. They are the most significant actions these two organisations promote, both in terms of the number of people involved in them (students, trainees, teachers, educators and coordinators) and the connections with the adult education policies.

The legal framework for the second-chance education courses (1st and 2nd cycles) is laid down in the Education Act; the features they have taken on in the case in question are a result of the development of social inclusion policies, especially in the context of the Social Integration Income. The courses are responses to educational problems identified both at a national and local level through needs analyses. The objectives they set out to achieve include decreasing the illiteracy rate, increasing schooling levels, the social and professional integration of young people and adults at risk, and the fight against school dropout. In addition to these, there are other more general ones, such as facilitating access to social facilities, as well as managing and reorganising them with a view to achieving social equality, promoting school education, vocational training and access to employment, correcting social and educational asymmetries and fostering local development.

These actions take place in school classrooms which the city hall or other organisations make available. The pedagogical methods often used are presenting subject matter and doing tasks and exercises; however, the county coordinator highlighted the efforts some of the teachers make to respect each learner's individual pace and have less asymmetrical interpersonal relationships. It was reported that more active pedagogical methods, such as group work, are also used, in particular when trying to motivate the adult learners. In this respect, the work carried out by the teachers is regarded as crucial, including that which goes beyond what is established in the syllabus:

The students turn to their teachers a lot to solve personal problems or for help. (...) I'd go the bank or to pay my electricity bill; sometimes I'd meet students and help them; and with the current teachers it's the same. (...) Because people turn to us a lot. If they feel a sense of closeness with the trainers and the organisers, then we're like a haven to them; it's as if we're a second family.(...)That's why in order to attract and motivate people , besides all the materials that are available, you need to be somewhat sensitive and captivate the students from an other angle. (Interview B 24)

On these courses, the students are essentially assessed in terms of their performance in reading, writing and arithmetic as well as in discussing and understanding relevant contemporary topics. It is the teacher's responsibility to make the exercises and tests as well as the semester report. This is perhaps where the contrast between different and, in some cases, opposing cultural worlds is most evident. On the one hand, the students' subcultures, marked by a sense of *belonging* to certain *social groups*, by their experiences and by their concerns regarding life and school. On the other hand, the school culture based on institutionalised, formal and legitimate knowledge, embodied by the teachers. It is in this context that views of the world and, above all of school, are in opposition to each other: those that value students' experience and reflection on their everyday life and those that value teaching practices based on the transmission and acquisition of decontextualised knowledge. The students, interestingly enough, frequently prefer the former; in fact, the students' previous schooling experiences may be crucial in this confrontation; an affinity with a certain *representation of school* that each subject has ingrained from his school career may constitute the motive to continue studying.

The *association* also carries out highly structured actions, namely the adult education and training courses (EFA). The EFA courses were devised within the scope of the European Union's Community Support Framework, more specifically the Operational Programme for Employment, Training and Social Development, and combine two important features: education, up to the 9th year of schooling, and vocational training. The main objectives of these initiatives are to raise the academic and professional qualifications of the population and to meet the needs of the labour market. The education and training needs are identified by a needs analysis carried out by the *association* itself and/or other institutions.

(...) it is through the needs analysis that we annually review and update our local action plan, which is a document that characterises the region in terms of education, population and economy .The region is thus characterised, enabling us to have an updated picture. (...)A needs analysis for next year is currently being conducted for us by the Sociology Department of University Y. (Interview A17)

From a pedagogical point of view, these courses seek to combine training in a classroom with workplace training by means of a traineeship. These courses begin by taking stock of the competencies, so as to collect relevant data for the pedagogical work to be developed later, based on the experiences and the knowledge previously acquired by the trainees. The subject matter is organised around what are known as *life themes* in order to motivate and stimulate student interest, in what is regarded as an innovative training model centred on the adults, their life histories and their needs. This type of work is based on

active methods that call for trainee participation, with preference being given to group work, field trips, simulations, and role-playing, among others.

The courses run by the *association* are mainly geared towards training workers for specialised technical services, such as electricity, installation and operation of computer systems, business skills, gardening, carpentry and sewing among others, as well as for welfare, such as family and community support, geriatrics and educational action. The courses are mostly attended by women aged 30 to 50, although men are in majority in the electricity and carpentry courses. Due to the crisis affecting the main economic sectors of the Vale do Ave region in Northern Portugal where the *association* is located, in the past five years there has been an increase in the number of people, particularly the unemployed, interested in attending the courses, which has meant that the vacancies are not enough to meet such a high demand. As a result, the selection of trainees has become a particularly sensitive issue to the point that the *association* has recently hired qualified professionals, namely psychologists, to coordinate the process and adopt selection criteria that are complementary to the ones set by the funding agencies.

The *association's* senior managers believe that the objectives pertaining to the design and implementation of the courses have been very satisfactorily achieved due to the individual and social impacts that can be ascribed to them, namely the possibilities the courses opened up in terms of access to the job market. In this respect, it was reported that a significant number of trainees that had been unemployed when the courses began managed to get a job once they had ended (the rate was approximately 75%). This was mainly explained by the fact compulsory schooling was completed and did not necessarily entail carrying out a professional activity in the field in which training was provided. Such a result, in the managers' point of view, cannot be dissociated from the kind of work that was carried out, as the trainees had the full support of the professional staff; for instance, whenever it was detected that the trainees were somewhat uninterested in the training projects they were involved in, the staff sought to discover the reasons and some of the trainees could be referred to other educational and training forms of provision.

Another explanation that was given for the success of these courses pertains to the functions assigned to evaluation. In these courses, evaluation covers the training process, the performance of the trainers, trainees and mediators, as well as the organisation itself. These practices, together with the trainees' self-evaluation, induce a strong regulation (self and hetero) of the projects and thereby contribute to enhancing their suitability and quality¹⁶.

Evaluation has various objectives. We have to evaluate the actual training, the way it's carried out, the equipment that was used and the way it was organised. We evaluate the trainers' performance, so as to get some feedback on what goes on in training as well as some feedback on our own performance as far as the organisation side is concerned. In addition to this, the trainees are also evaluated, both by the trainers and by doing self-evaluation. All this enables us to make improvements in the work we carry out as a training provider. (Interview A22)

¹⁶ The funding agency would then examine these evaluations, which would determine the support to be given later; the same purpose was assigned to audits that were carried out by other bodies that were not necessarily dependent on these agencies.

Towards an interpretive summary

The cases examined have shown that in the field of adult education there are a wide variety of agencies, structures, programmes, measures, mechanisms and support resources, which make it a highly multifaceted field. As was stated previously, the aim of this paper was to contribute towards reconstructing a dispersed reality, acknowledging the actors and their legitimacy and reconstructing the object of study (cf. Canário, 1999; Bélanger & Federighi, 2000). In short, we endeavoured to gain perception of the field and the multiplicity of initiatives that comprise it. In this respect, the cases studied reveal that there are significant aspects that are beyond what is immediately recognisable, even when we only consider that part of reality we have chosen to study.

The diversity of actions indicates that the contributions made by adult education are being increasingly valued (even though, as we have stated before, that may not be acknowledged), not only as a training strategy, very often put to rhetorical use and acclaimed as the way forward to overcome the employment crisis, but also as a strategy for social and civic advancement, for strengthening democracy, social justice, participation and active citizenship. As we pointed out, adult education plays an important role in the educational arena of many countries. To a certain extent, we may say that on a discourse level adult education is assigned the utmost importance, though it should be noticed that, at the same time, it is undergoing a reconfiguration, which stems from it being directly and almost exclusively bound to “employability” and to labour market “needs”.

In this context, it seems that other more traditional approaches to adult education have been cast aside or taken a back seat. However, this trend, which is visible at both European and international levels (cf. Melo, Lima & Almeida, 2002; Bélanger & Federighi, 2000 and Foley, 2004), may conceal different interpretations of work in adult education and dilute the variations between projects which, as they are distinct in terms of their goals, their target groups, their objects and methods, do correspond to different educational agendas. The cases we have studied reveal these tensions and contradictions, which is another reason why they are a relevant object worth examining.

Looking back on the analytical approach adopted, it resulted in a series of organisational principles that we would now like to elaborate on briefly, even though, as was repeatedly stated, the heterogeneous nature of the object, which frequently translates into a diffuse reality, challengingly raises the issue of the construction of the object.

Assigning centrality to certain dimensions of adult education is a statement we regard as suitable to describe the increasing relevance that some dimensions and working methods of adult education seem to have gained. It is particularly the case of *lifelong learning*, which has become the motto of policies aiming to build an “information and knowledge society”, as well as of a more internationally competitive European economy that values individuals and their “competencies” in addition to promoting general and vocational training. In this context, the Education and Training Courses run by the *association* are a good example of the impact that the actions funded by European Union Programmes, namely the Operational Programme for Employment, Training and Social Development (POEFDS) have had on adult education in Portugal.

The lifelong learning policies have also meant that a greater importance has been attached to non-governmental organisations and other profit-making ones, which are now responsible for running most of those courses, especially since the *S@ber+* Programme was launched. This fact has led to some fundamental changes. The first pertains to the emergence of these new organisations and of new actors promoting adult education and

training actions. At first sight, it may seem that these new actors may benefit the development of the field, but the fact is that the rationale underlying both the intervention of these organisations and the trainers' activity gives rise to interests and objectives which are in some circumstances difficult to relate with the interests and objectives of the adults undergoing training as well as with adult education principles that promote democracy, social justice and participation.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for the *centre* to access these funding programmes, which does pose a problem as far as designing and developing a higher number of initiatives are concerned but, contradictorily enough, makes it possible for the centre to exercise relative autonomy in the creation and recreation of the information and awareness-raising practices that target adults. These practices are based on experimentation, resort to trial and error, are reflected on and reconceptualised during and after implementation and, despite often being ephemeral and volatile, possess a pedagogical value that merits highlighting.

Valuing specific forms of pedagogical intervention is a statement that may adequately describe the prevalence of transmission-type pedagogies, which are now associated to training and its connection with the labour market. These are more structured and rigid forms of teaching and learning which are, in many cases, part of heavily controlled and regulated programmes. They are to be found both in the actions undertaken by the *association*, often inspired by the rules governing schools, and in the second-chance basic education initiatives promoted by the *unit*. When these models, which are based on the transmission of decontextualised knowledge that is possibly disconnected from the students' experiences, are applied in the field of adult education, they typically lead to the formalisation of adult education practices (Canário, 1999).

In this context, other dimensions disappear or take a back seat, with other pedagogical ways of acting being underestimated, namely those that link reflection with action, theory with practice, that mobilise previous knowledge and that integrate individual and/ or collective knowledge from multiple sources.

Fostering engagement in meaningful learning, by resorting to a variety of contextualised forms, methods, techniques and strategies that are appropriate to the interests, motivations and needs of the students, is a motto that may be used to describe some of the actions we examined. The cases studied reveal different scientific and pedagogical options which frequently depended on the targeted groups, the available support materials and the commitment of teachers and trainers:

- the trainers and trainees involved the adult education and training courses promoted by the *association* were highly committed to the activities, the latter in the hope of giving their lives a new direction and the former as a result of both the innovative subject matter, namely in terms of the life themes covered, and of the pedagogical approach to the general training, more dynamic and active in nature, and to the vocationally oriented training, where workplace contexts seem to be more decisive for adult learning:

- students and teachers participating in the second-chance basic education courses run by the *unit* seek simultaneously regular and alternative forms of pedagogic intervention. On the one hand, the teachers devise forms of pedagogic action that are based on their own teaching experience. When they are faced with the adults' life and learning difficulties as well as the ineffectiveness of such forms of action, they seek to recreate other forms of intervention. On the other hand, the adults, students of a school of lesser importance, do consider knowledge to be

important (even though they do not always see its usefulness and do not always relate to it) and have a positive view of the role of school. They therefore acknowledge the distance that separates them from institutionalised culture and official knowledge, but highlight the social relationships developed within the group;

- the trainees and the trainers on the out-of-school education courses organised by the *unit* are very much in tune with the objectives of the courses. In the case of the trainees, the courses allow them to spend their spare time carrying out useful and meaningful activities and to develop new social relationships. As for the trainers, they are able to focus on familiar subject matter and issues without having to be dependent on rigid operational rules and evaluation procedures that are typical of the school system;

- the professionals and the population involved in the information and awareness-raising actions implemented by the *centre* are also significantly engaged in the actions that are promoted, as they offer the adults a chance to find responses to their needs while making it possible for the professionals to experiment with new forms of intervention and to reflect on their results.

The cases examined in this text show there is an active involvement of different actors who, at various levels, contribute to the recognition and development of adult education. Among these are the adults who, in their search for other types of knowledge and opportunities to establish social relationships, get involved in other forms of learning and develop other abilities; the teachers, trainers and professionals from various fields who commit themselves to pedagogic interventions that are efficient, effective and relevant to the students and trainees; the organizations promoting adult education actions that have to face a variety of challenges and tensions in their quest to provide new education and training courses and learning opportunities; the public bodies responsible for adult education, among them the different State departments that monitor the development of the actions that have a varying degree of formality.

However, this involvement does not always go hand in hand with a reflection on the processes being developed. That may be ascribed to a lack of tradition among the adults to formally present their educational problems and needs or to the fact that the objectives and interests that guide those processes do not always accommodate a version of adult education that fosters personal development, encourages a critical reading of the world and seeks to create the necessary conditions to bring about change in the surrounding environment.

In this regard, it is imperative to hear trainers and trainees, to know what their motivations and expectations are, to reflect (together with them) on the adult education actions and their meaning so as to assess the usefulness and relevance of education and learning instances that have to take into account the people they were designed and developed for.

This exercise in reflection has enormous potential, especially if it allows for the contrast and dialogue between several views of the world, some based on life experiences, others sustained by conventional, institutionalised and legitimate knowledge, if it fosters the articulation between the various instances of personal knowledge and provided it allows for the intersection of the various subcultures that adults share, thereby promoting equal opportunities in terms of access to and success in education.

In addition, this dialogue may further assist adult education in gaining not only social but also pedagogical, political and civic recognition that will consolidate the field

and promote the implementation of a humanistic and democratic education fostering citizenship that is available to everyone (Melo, Lima & Almeida, 2000). A global and integrated public policy, yet to be devised and implemented, may naturally constitute a foundation stone upon which it will be built.

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