European Journal of Education, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2009, Part I

Reflections on the Professionalisation of Adult Educators in the Framework of Public Policies in Portugal

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Introduction

Although adult education in Europe goes back to the 18th century and the emergence of modern States, it was only in the 20th century (mostly after World War II) that any significant changes occurred to lend this area of professional expertise a character of its own. But the heterogeneous nature of adult education, involving a rich assortment of actors and contexts, and the fragmented, disjointed nature of public policies have militated against the consistent professionalisation of adult educators.

Specialised training is crucial to this process. As adult education is heterogeneous, and since many of the policies for the sector have been sporadic, the *profession* of adult educator has never really been structured; this is why there are several *professions* related to the promotion of initiatives for the educating, training and learning of adults. These are nourishing a diffident professionalisation process that is much better established in countries with a longer tradition of public policies for adult education (Nuissl & Lattke, 2008; Research voor Beleid, 2008).

Portugal is no stranger to this scenario. Even though, in the 40 years since the 1974 revolution, adult education has developed considerably, public policies have only appeared at irregular intervals, so they have shown little consistency (Lima, 2005, p. 32). This irregularity has meant that some areas have been emphasised to the detriment of others, leading to the segmentation and differentiation of a field that is already heterogeneous. With the increasing importance given to *lifelong learning* today, adult educators are taking on new roles, as they are in many EU countries, and their work has greater impact, especially in the economic and social spheres. They operate in a wide variety of organisations and their diverse duties are linked to the knowledge, skills and abilities of adults who are increasingly looking for more initiatives.

Despite the growing importance ascribed to learning and even to the work of these professionals, many people recognise that little is known about what they do, their qualifications, their professional careers and the circumstances of their employment. The ALPINE project was designed to analyse the work of adult educators in various European countries. It set out to describe the variety of adult education and training contexts, provide an inventory of the different professionals involved in non-formal adult education and training and identify the factors that influence their work. This study was carried out by 15 researchers who were to describe, analyse and compare the work of adult educators in the 27 countries of

the EU, as well as in Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Turkey and Croatia (Research voor Beleid, 2008). Data were gathered through documental analysis and interviews with adult educators and politicians. The University of Minho's Unit for Adult Education was responsible for analysing the information from Portugal, Spain and France.

This article examines the characteristics and working conditions of adult educators in relation to the public policies implemented in Portugal as from 1974. These policies have encouraged the emergence of various adult educators who have been incorporated into heterogeneous work contexts, accounting for important changes in the directions that have been followed. This is why, for several — very different — decades, volunteers and professionals from various areas were involved in adult education. New professionals have appeared recently, with the implementation since 2000 of the adult education and training policy under the Lisbon Strategy. This has led to a ground-breaking, systematic educational intervention that includes the mediation, training, management and assessment of the educational and training careers of adults. But the nature of the work and the conditions in which it takes place seem to be undermining an emerging professionalisation process. To discuss some of the questions raised by this process we used the data and analyses produced under the ALPINE project, and more especially the evidence of a person responsible for public policies (P1), a competences recognition, validation and certification official (R1) and two pedagogical coordinators (PC1 and PC2).

Popular Education and Basic Education: Animators and Literacy Teachers

April 25 1974, the day of Portugal's revolution, brought about an explosion of popular social movements that affected a number of areas of social life, including adult education. The General Directorate of Permanent Education had been created in 1972, under the previous regime. After 1974, it ran an innovative public policy that sought to respond to the claims of popular initiative. It proposed to coordinate the government and the popular movement, thus becoming, according to A. Melo & A. Benavente (1978), a 'subversive' unit of the public administration which implemented actions that were aimed simultaneously at the ministerial hierarchy and the people. The work undertaken was based on two goals: to respond directly to the demands of social groups, gradually giving educational answers; and to stimulate the will for collective development and change through an intervention which, while not having been sought by communities, appeared in writings about local cultural events. It was intended to take off from what adults used to have, i.e. popular culture and individual expertise, which were involved with school and work through vocational training and popular education initiatives (Melo & Benavente, 1978, pp. 16–19).

Under this policy, clearly influenced by UNESCO's *lifelong education* programme (Faure *et al.*, 1974), adult educators worked to foster democracy and development, autonomy and equal opportunity. This meant making the most of the historic conditions of the time and pursuing strategies of self-directed learning and self-management for local organisations to produce relevant knowledge for people. In this democratisation process, development would emerge from the participation of the adults. Animators and local organisers played a crucial part in these

initiatives, as they had connections with popular education groups. The literacy teachers were equally important, since they were able to teach literacy skills and supervise the adults in formal education processes. Other types of teachers were also involved in adult education and cultural development actions, prompted by a range of local organisations (Melo & Benavente, 1978, pp. 11–13).

As there was no specific training for adult educators, it was the experience of working with communities and the attendance of continuing education courses (poorly structured and sporadic) run by the above-mentioned General Directorate that allowed the development of differentiated knowledge. In a specific historical context, it was to a great extent the militancy of many volunteers that made the popular education interventions especially motivating. The knowledge and abilities acquired resulted from identifying and backing (material and technical) whoever, across the country, invested in the literacy and basic education of their peers by collecting, compiling, analysing and organising methods and materials that were then used in actions on the ground to prepare a training programme on this basis. It was hoped that this would prevent pre-conceived training models with a strong theoretical or ideological dimension from restricting the social, and even pedagogical, creativity that was then being expressed. Despite this, the animators and literacy teachers, who lacked a properly consolidated profile, used to get some technical support from teams from the General Directorate of Permanent Education who used to travel to where adult education actions were held; there were also some small regional teams already established for this purpose. This support basically consisted in advising and distributing educational material.

After 1976, in a post-revolution period of capitalist normalisation (Afonso, 2008), this policy was abandoned by the government of the time. The virtual paralysis that the General Directorate suffered thereafter expressed, as L. A. Rothes (2003) noted, a deviation from the political guidelines for the sector. The forms of popular mobilisation whose stimulation had been sought in the previous period came to be viewed with mistrust, and the practice of seconding teachers from the regular system reflected the urgency of a mandate based on second-chance schooling, removing teachers who were more committed to popular education from the public system. It was in this context that the General Directorate took over the continuing training of these teachers, organising regular, but not systematised, training (Rothes, 2003, p. 38).

But it is the stream of popular education, less enthusiastic then than a few years before, that again plays a vital role in the preparation of the 1979 National Plan for Adult Literacy and Basic Education. According to the Ministry for Education, its aims were to reduce illiteracy, expand access to compulsory education for adults and coordinate these measures with popular education and vocational training so as to create educational actions of quality that could cope with the different forms of illiteracy, prevent cultural backsliding and embrace the diversity of basic educational needs, as revealed under the previous policy (Ministério da Educação, 1979, p. 75).

The plan stated that these goals should be achieved by adult educators who, as a result of the initiatives undertaken under the earlier policy, showed that they had a common profile in terms of ability, experience and practice, but differed widely when it came to basic professional training, personal history and path of social intervention. In the plan, these differences explained the non-creation of a single, institutionalised career of adult educator. Nonetheless, they were to promote adult

education actions, along with professionals from other sectors, and the plan established that a decision on the use of teachers would depend on circumstances. The selection criteria would involve: i) evaluating the adult educators' experience of life acquired outside the classroom, associated with overall culture based on reflection and organisation of the knowledge gained; ii) integration in the environment where the action took place and experience of working with local communities and groups; iii) ability to relate to others, emphasising cooperation, tolerance, easy communication and working in groups; iv) willingness to find out and respect the identity and socio-cultural individuality of each group; v) having time, particularly for actions in the evenings and at weekends; and vi) avoiding adult educators who were linked to political parties or religious groups (Ministério da Educação, 1979, pp. 105–106).

The plan also mentioned the need for the government, through the responsible General Directorate, to train its officials in accordance with the purposes of the public policy then in force. But despite the importance of these intentions, the goals established by the plan were far from being met. Many of the initiatives were only broached ineffectually and many others remained at the experimental stage at which they had been launched. Contributing factors to the problems experienced were the inertia of the public administration, the low status of adult education in its eyes and the muted expression of social pressures in favour of adult education. In these circumstances, the work carried out by the many different adult educators seems to reflect the ambivalence of this public policy (Silva & Rothes, 1998, p. 22). This ambivalence is seen in the continued commitment to participation, which is clear in the programme discourses, and the action of many local development agents and community leaders, many of whom were volunteers. But the aim was to involve this commitment to compensatory education for adults through training for the labour market. These programmes were led by teachers and trainers. As a group, however, they were steadily becoming larger and larger and more homogeneous in terms of formal education practices. But the working conditions were quite different, given that the teachers had more stable employment contracts with schools or departments within the Ministry of Education than the trainers who were mostly working on a services basis.

Second-chance Education: the Place Reserved for Teachers

1986 saw the approval of the Basic Law for the Education System (BLES) (Law 46/86). It defined adult education as a subsector comprising two segments: second-chance education and out-of-school education. Second-chance education was the most significant in terms of the adults enrolled and the teachers and schools (especially state schools) involved. With the aim of promoting equal opportunities for access to and success in education, the Ministry of Education played a fundamental role in encouraging basic education for adults, particularly in terms of the conception and development of contexts and practices. This effort is reflected principally in organisational structures, the curriculum, teaching methods, supervision and assessment. Concerning out-of-school education, this was less relevant in terms of the human, material and financial resources involved. Planned with the support of the Ministry of Education, but implemented by non-governmental organisations, non-profit-making organisations, etc., it very

often took the form of activities that were part of community intervention projects and socio-cultural promotion (Silva, 1996).

Regarding the training of adult educators, the BLES briefly mentions the possibility of running special courses leading to qualifications in areas such as socio-cultural leadership and basic adult education, in addition to strictly educational areas. The two segments mentioned above were organised by two types of adult educators: second-chance education, with teachers seconded from regular teaching duties and adult educators receiving a grant, while out-of-school education involved only those who received a grant. As before, these adult educators were a mixed group that included people with various professional qualifications and experience, to whom little attention had been given in terms of continuing education. They were mostly teachers and municipal coordinators who benefited from continuing education programmes in the field of adult education, planned or coordinated by the General Directorate for the adult education sector or implemented under specific teacher training programmes.

Notwithstanding the effort put into continuous teacher training, the 1998 Second-chance Education Assessment Study report listed a number of weaknesses in the remedial education professionals. It noted that the systematic use of (usually temporary, and not always voluntary) teachers working in the regular education system comprised risks inherent to teaching quality. For instance, there was a tendency to use teaching methods with adults that were better suited to children, techniques which were more widely favoured in classroom work, and the fact that pedagogical teams saw second-chance education as a marginal service that all too often lacked due pedagogical planning (Pinto, Matos & Rothes, 1998, pp. 31–32).

The *Vocationalist* Trend and the Importance of Being a Trainer

The Programme for Educational Development for Portugal took off in 1989, largely financed by EU structural funds. It included a sub-programme for adult education which was viewed as a priority intervention. The serious state of education in Portugal at the time justified the end established by the programme: improving workers' qualifications in the context of modernising the economy. An action project was therefore designed; it was centrally led and the government was to be the sole promoter of the initiatives to be developed. Management levels and structures were established for them to control the application of sundry rules and the allocation of considerable funds. It significantly boosted the actions implemented by the public adult education system, but there were no noteworthy changes, although the compulsory education and vocational training of adults were stressed (Silva & Rothes, 1998).

This programme saw the emergence of a particularly significant number of vocational training actions, coordinated and controlled by the Employment and Vocational Training Institute and the Ministry of Labour. Since large sums of money were involved, a good number of trainers took part in a growing number of training actions, which included general, technical and vocational components. The variety of the actions also had an effect on the trainers who took part. It was considered important for the development of the programme that the trainers should have an 'appropriate profile'. This meant choosing trainers who could be: i) 'inventors', inducing a change of mentalities, attitudes and behaviours; ii) 'leaders', able to galvanise the groups and accompany them as they solved their

problems and conflicts and met their objectives; iii) 'facilitators', helping trainees to find ways and means of learning inside and outside their socio-educational environment; and, finally, iv) 'organisers', who were able to plan, implement and assess the pedagogical path. Preference was given to trainers with prior experience in the sphere of adult education and vocational training who had taken courses in these areas (Ministério da Educação, 1993, pp. 19–20).

The characteristics of these trainers were causing concern about their levels of knowledge and this led to many more pedagogic training initiatives. In the mid-1990s, the diversity of content and approaches covered by the training actions led to the Employment and Vocational Training Institute taking charge of designing them and controlling their development. It was later made compulsory for trainers, people responsible for the pedagogic aspects, and other officials to attend these initiatives if they were involved in the activities funded by programmes organised under the European Social Fund or the activities promoted by the Ministry of Labour.

So there were no significant changes in the political direction of adult education in Portugal in the decade following the enactment of the Basic Law. Second-chance education was still a basic concern. But a new objective was emerging in the political discourse, which some authors called *vocationalist* (Stoer, Stoleroff & Correia, 1990). It flagged investment in upgrading the qualifications of the active population. Vocational training became a fundamental tool, assigning an essential role to the trainers by making training a lever in the drive to modernise the country. The stream of popular education then faded from public policies. This was the situation in the mid-1990s when the Employment and Vocational Training Institute for which the Ministries of Labour and Employment were responsible became responsible for certifying the trainers' professional aptitude and approving trainers' pedagogical training courses, that were organised by both public and private entities. Significant sums of money, mainly from EU funds, were allocated to the training of trainers (Rothes, 2003).

The Sluggish Development of First Degree Training

The barriers erected by these fragmented public policies were reflected in the graduate training of adult educators. The teachers involved in popular education and animation initiatives were not given formal education opportunities. But within the Ministry of Education system, in which teachers tended to be seconded from the regular system, some continuing education was being organised by the relevant General Directorate. By the end of the 1980s, there was still no specialised training in this area. In fact, the first initiative in Community Intervention and Adult Education came in 1989. It was aimed at teachers and other education professionals and led to a qualification that was equivalent to a licentiate degree. These initiatives have been consolidated since then and today there is a range of degrees in adult education (Rothes, 2003, p. 40).

Among the courses offered were degrees in education, education sciences, social education, community and socio-cultural intervention etc., which did not specifically tackle adult education, but did cover topics which were fundamental to this area and the work of adult educators. It should be noted that, in these two decades, the focus in adult educators training favoured socio-educational initiatives for democracy and development. This training was strongly related to the

interest shown by higher education institutions in local development projects and actions concerned with community and adult education (Rothes, 2003).

In brief, the fragmented and segmented nature of public policies on adult education in Portugal created a heterogeneous pool of adult educators. From volunteers to professionals from various domains, to community leaders, local development agents, animators, teachers and trainers, the people involved in adult education initiatives were many and varied. Since there was no specific training in adult education and the training provided in higher education colleges in subjects related to the field only appeared slowly, many teachers had to rely on their experience and the knowledge this had imparted to them and on continuing education that was held fairly regularly and systematically. This is why, at the end of the last century, the adult educator was often working part-time, sometimes unpaid, and carried out a number of occupational tasks that were not always consistent.

The Relaunch of a Public Policy for Adult Education: the beginning of professionalisation

Between 1995 and 2002, the Socialist governments proceeded with a series of proposals to 'relaunch adult education'. This led to the *Knowing+.* Programme for the Development and Expansion of Adult Education and Training run by the National Agency of Adult Education and Training. This programme was justified because Portuguese society was changing drastically and quickly and changes were particularly evident in the world of work. According to political decision makers, the modernisation of the economy, the required improvement in competitiveness and the omnipresence of new technologies demanded better-qualified workers who were better able to adapt and had new, more complex knowledge and skills. On the one hand, because of the sluggish spread of access to education, the educational levels of the adult population, especially the active population, were lower than in other EU and OECD countries. On the other, the changes in Portugal's productive structure, which was not used to expect especially differentiated skills of its workers, were now forcing important changes in the ways of acquiring knowledge and working. Furthermore, the shortage and inefficacy of adult education policies meant that an innovative and effective intervention was required (Melo, Matos & Silva, 1999, pp. 19).

This is the context of the changed perception of adult education, an expression that was meanwhile removed from political discourse and replaced by 'adult education and training'. The education and training of adults is based on the diversification of supply, involving profit-making public entities and civil society in its promotion. The forms of provision were supported by addressing the skills through the recognition and validation of skills acquired informally and by the development of new models, methodologies and materials for pedagogical and socio-educational intervention. They enabled the interaction of school-type content with vocational content in a context of *competences for life*, as in the case of the Adult Education and Training Courses (Melo, Matos & Silva, 1999, p. 12). Centres were created to promote the competence recognition, validation and certification service. These were mostly incorporated into civil society institutions that established partnerships with the government.

This programme advocated the emergence of new adult educators to include mediators, competence recognition, validation and certification officials and pedagogical coordinators. It also changed the trainer function, bringing it closer to education. So, whereas in the past, the basic qualifications of adult educators were myriad, and very often a degree was not considered important, from this point, the licentiate degree, preferably in social sciences, became the minimum requirement for entry into the professions. This radically changed the characteristics of those working in adult education, qualifying the group, rejuvenating it, feminising it and making it more demanding in terms of continuing education.

A new scenario was developing. For instance, 82.6% of the mediators and trainers in Northern Portugal were aged between 24 and 44 and there were more women (65.7%); there were more female mediators than male and they were younger and had less professional experience than the trainers. Overall, the trainers and mediators were happy with the way the pedagogical teams worked, the curricular structure of the adult education and training courses, the pedagogical-technical support and material provided, although it was these that also caused most of the difficulties. In order to deal with these, the National Agency for Adult Education and Training drew up a set of continuing education initiatives promoted by the central teams and local organisers that would explore practices and consolidate experience and knowledge (Alves, 2003). Special heed was also paid to the staff responsible for promoting and monitoring the forms of provision proposed. This was to ensure that the teachers could attend continuing education courses, preferably as part of a research-training project, with local organisers also being included (since they were in charge of running and coordinating local partnerships), along with key competences assessors, trainer-tutors and those in charge of the Knowing + Clubs (Melo, Matos & Silva, 1999, pp. 39–40).

The New Opportunities Initiative and Adult Education Professionals

After 2005, the New Opportunities Initiative resumed the main forms of provision offered by the Knowing + Programme. Today, these are run by the National Qualification Agency, under the Ministry for Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. In conjunction with the *lifelong learning* policies established by the EU and provided for under the policies for employment and the technological modernisation of the Portuguese economy, the objective of this initiative was to provide a major impetus to upgrade the qualifications of the Portuguese, based on two premises: provisions targeting young people and others aimed at adults. In terms of those for adults, their purpose is to enable people to recover, complete and progress in their studies, based on the knowledge and skills they acquired in informal contexts; apart from this, competence recognition, validation and certification have become more important, since this is an alternative to a short course leading to a supplementary vocational training qualification. These forms of provision, i.e. the vocational training actions, were also aimed at adults with low educational levels.

This new incentive in public policy for adult education and training required a greater involvement of educational institutions. Adult education and training professionals are thus becoming an increasingly significant group of teachers. Legislation related to the work of these new professionals created duties that were more homogeneous and specific, guided by goals other than those that guide the work of

professionals in other social and educational domains. But it should be noted that trainers in many adult vocational training actions are left in the cold because their educational qualifications are often much lower than a first degree, even though they have relevant experience in the area in which they teach.

Apart from teachers in basic and secondary second-chance education, there are no systematised data about adult educators who were involved in this field in the past three decades. But we do know that at present, as a result of the New Opportunities Initiative, there has been an explosion in the promotion of forms of provision, such as competence recognition, validation and certification and vocational training courses. Hence, there are more professionals today than ever recorded in Portugal. This situation raises new questions about the evolution of adult education and the professionalisation of those involved in it.

Between Meeting Targets and the Professionalisation Process?

What has been accomplished so far under the New Opportunities Initiative is viewed by many as positive in terms of extending the forms of provision of adult education and training. In the last two years, provision has expanded considerably and it is hoped that 1 million Portuguese will have gained certification by 2010. In 2007, over 250,000 young people and adults were enrolled in courses offered under the New Opportunities Initiative, of whom more than 90,000 were adults. They were aged between 25 and 44 (about 66%), many had jobs (about 76%), and women outnumbered men. Over 55,000 people were involved in competence recognition, validation and certification processes and another 18,000 were taking Adult Education and Training Courses (Ministério da Educação e Ministério do Trabalho e da Solidariedade Social, 2007). The New Opportunities Centres have played a part in this very significant increase in adult participation. The Competencies Recognition, Validation and Certification Centres were converted to provide them. The goals of the New Opportunities Centres are: to promote lifelong learning and a liking for education capable of catering for adults seeking education and training; to diagnose, sort and counsel such people; to develop skills' recognition, validation and certification procedures; to organise short supplementary training actions, and to undertake the prospective monitoring of the qualified candidates.

There are at present 456 New Opportunities Centres, of which some 300 are in basic, secondary and higher education institutions. Over 100 belong to vocational colleges, 45 are in companies or sectorial associations, 25 are in local development organisations, 10 are in social solidarity institutions and 8 are in local authorities, municipal enterprises or associations of municipal councils (figures from May 2008 provided by the National Qualification Agency). The number of jobs linked to adult education and training has therefore witnessed rapid growth.

According to a sample of trainees from the New Opportunities Centres who were attending continuing education in the University of Minho last June, most were female and aged between 22 and 45, were graduates in human and social sciences, particularly in teacher training, education, psychology, sociology, social service, economics, management, human resource management, socio-cultural leadership, and public relations. About half were working in schools, while a third were in non-governmental associations. These organisations were employing people who had only started working in adult education and training in the last two years (Unidade de Educação de Adultos, 2008a).

Several professional categories can be found in the New Opportunities Centres, viz., the director, coordinator, trainers (especially those involved in key skills areas), competence recognition, validation and certification officials, diagnosis and counselling staff, administrative staff, personal and social mediators and external assessors — though the latter are independent of the New Opportunities Centres. Hence, regular school teachers who are now involved in training activities are joining the group of professionals in adult education and training as trainers.

This has changed the nature of these professionals (Unidade de Educação de Adultos, 2008a). This is seen by many people as a scenario that does not favour the burgeoning professionalisation of adult educators. On the one hand, the option for the mass recruitment of teachers raises doubts that foresee the formalisation of initiatives that have a non-formal basis and the possibility of undervaluing forms of provision which, being based on an approach that is paradigmatically opposed to that on which many in-school practices are based; on the other, the ambitious political ends oblige the certification of a meaningful number of adults by the end of this decade and a significant rise in the work rate of the professionals, raising doubts as to the rigour of professional practice.

> [Looking at those New Opportunities Centres that have opened recently] there was an excessive massifying of Centres. Everyone is entitled to have a Centre nearby, easily accessed for the purposes of competencies recognition, validation and certification. So city X with its five Centres . . . the question of competition clearly leads to facilitism. (R1)

This policy, too, is based on a programme logic. Many people therefore argue that adult education and training will have an end in view. In addition, these professionals seem to be in a precarious professional situation, since a significant majority is on fixed term contracts and others are working on a provision of services regime. So this precariousness is seen as a serious constraint on involving these educators in adult education services, on performance when it comes to designing teaching materials, on monitoring and on the management of the activities themselves. Interviewees felt that this was one of the most significant obstacles to professionalisation and that it involved a number of other problems.

> Adult educators are facing the need to overcome precariousness, and to value the profession socially. This could be achieved if there was a properly structured public policy. (. . .) Other challenges linked to this situation relate to the changes society is undergoing, which adult educators ought to understand in order to work better with adults; they need to be more sensitive to the problems of specific groups of trainees who may, for instance, be at risk of social exclusion (. . .). (PC2)

Precariousness is found in the working conditions, since, although many adult educators currently have fixed term contracts, there are many others, such as the trainers, who are freelancers and work for several organisations simultaneously. In addition, the instability of public policy on adult education, the withdrawal of the government from several social domains and tendencies to manage human resources with flexibility in mind, while at the same time making jobs more precarious as part of a strategy to cut costs and boost competitiveness, seem to be

making professions in adult education and training forms of provision even more fragile.

Continuing Education: Stressing Theory or Practice?

The political consensus generated with regard to the importance of lifelong learning and upgrading the qualifications of the Portuguese in the context of the economy is making careers in adult education and training attractive to young graduates seeking their first job in areas regarded as new and involving innovative working methods. But many know nothing about adult education. It was with this in mind that, in 2008, the National Qualification Agency re-thought the continuing education of these professionals by asking higher education institutions to develop a range of initiatives. This pioneering decision led to an initial training programme in the area of adult education. It comprises several modules. The objectives are: i) to encourage the continuing education of staff working in the New Opportunities Centres; ii) to deepen knowledge on the frameworks, contexts and practices of their activities; iii) to develop skills in the domain of methodologies and techniques for competence recognition, validation and certification; iv) to encourage the improvement of knowledge about benchmark skills and strategies associated with its operationalisation; and, v) to stimulate a critical positioning of adult education and training professionals, bearing in mind their experience in light of the contexts and pedagogical practices associated with educational forms of provision targeting adults (Unidade de Educação de Adultos, 2008b).

As there is no tradition of relations between the National Qualification Agency and higher education institutions with regard to continuing education, the initiatives accomplished are innovative, although there is some doubt as to the regularity and continuity in the medium term. In terms of content and pedagogical working methods, there is some concern with the analysis of issues relevant to adult education and working with small groups of trainees through recourse to active methods. Maybe it is because the basic training of these professionals is so varied that continuing education has so far been viewed as interesting and innovative by trainees, a time for learning and discussing topics (Unidade de Educação de Adultos, 2008a).

The content of these modules is based on systematised knowledge about adult education, covered in first degrees in education or education sciences, for example. It is also related to what is known about education practices in this area as a result of research undertaken by the relevant public services or by the higher education institutions. But this does not really seem to suffice to sustain the professionalisation of adult educators. There is still a gulf separating these actions from professional practice and the contexts in which it is developed. This leads us to think that future initiatives must consider research-training-action strategies in which the needs and problems of these professionals are discussed. They would make use of context-based problems, current professional profiles and the challenges faced by adult educators.

Heterogeneity of Entities in the Development of Public Policy: Instrumentalisation of Adult Educators?

The entities which currently host a New Opportunities Centre are many and varied. This heterogeneity has been regarded as an advantage, since it allows

greater scope for intervention, as it favours a more effective countrywide distribution of services targeting adults and the involvement of sectors and organisations that did not seem to rate education and training very highly in the past.

> It is important that other partners in civil society, companies, local groups, town halls, private institutions of social solidarity, should play a part, and themselves accept that identifying and embracing the importance of the processes by which people earn qualifications, and also what these process may offer in terms of changing the very organisations to which people belong. (P1)

This heterogeneity is, however, a constraint in that these organisations are governed by very different ends. This may be why control and regulation mechanisms are seen by the Agency responsible as very important for the development of this public policy, even though, from the point of view of the non-governmental organisations, it limits associative autonomy and restricts local intervention (Castro *et al.*, 2007) and encourages burdening the jobs of these professionals with red tape. Tasks have thus suffered progressive control and there has been a growing tendency to standardise the education and training processes. They have been shaped to conform to a set of principles of action which, while trying to ensure that adults in education and training benefit from identical access conditions and measures for success that correspond to their life trajectories and previous education nonetheless lead to the formalisation and standardisation of the education and training processes.

The formalisation and standardisation of practices should be linked to the ambitious goals of the public policies and the massification of forms of provision aimed at adults. This scenario suggests the instrumentalisation of adult educators and could be a powerful impediment to the consolidation of educational interventions which are more attentive to the characteristics of the adults and communities to which they belong. In this context, adult educators appear to be seeing their professional autonomy postponed and are therefore witnessing a steady weakening of the professionalisation process.

Convergence of Skills or Technicisation of the Job of Adult Educators?

The development of a public policy on adult education and training has led to a clear diversity of professionals, even though some professions have emerged very recently. These professionals have developed a comprehensive set of skills related to education and training, the appraisal of educational needs and self-assessment, the recognition, validation and certification of competences, the conception of educational and training materials based on new information and communication technologies, the conception and development of education and training methods and techniques, etc.

> Adult educators must be able to: get actively involved in the education and training initiatives they are controlling, develop materials and methods for educational initiatives, build material linked to information and communication technologies, create a dossier containing pedagogical information and techniques related to specific education and training courses. They should

> also develop self-directed learning, making use of a diary, by filling out self-assessment forms, and by taking part in both training actions that foster reflection on the work done, and meetings of teams of trainers, showing a positive attitude and backing colleagues and adult trainees, when they are present. (PC1)

These skills, which result from the knowledge gained in professional practice, are becoming increasingly moulded by the relentless technicisation of the processes and standardisation of education and training paths. This tends to make the action of professionals conform to requirements of a specialised technical nature and may lead to the under-appreciation of the educational aspect of the initiatives undertaken. In this context, such convergence expresses the centring of the work in particular professional domains, casting aside tasks and areas that were once the preferred sectors of intervention for adult educators.

Conclusion

According to Afonso (2008, p.76), a *modern conception of professionalism* is underpinned by several presumptions: i) a lengthy formal education at an advanced level, such as a licentiate degree; ii) the acquisition and development of 'complex professional knowledge'; iii) access to a clearly defined, assessed professional career; iv) the chance to follow continuing education; v) valuing membership of professional societies, such as trade unions; vi) upholding the collective creation of codes of professional ethics; vii) the assimilation and development of a specific professional culture; viii) the sharing of collective processes to construct a professional identity; ix) the interpretation and exercise of the profession with substantive margins of 'relative autonomy', rendering accounts and being answerable professionally and democratically for the work accomplished.

As we have seen, as far as public policies since 1974 are concerned, adult educators have been a mixed group which has quite recently been becoming more coherent, in the context of the adult education policy re-launched at the end of the 1990s, due to: a) the establishment of a labour market; b) the definition of professional profiles (with special emphasis on legally established guidelines and principles); and, c) the value placed on training, whether initial (with a licentiate degree being a basic requirement for entry into the profession) or continuing. So professional knowledge has been made more complex and this has fostered better understanding of the specificities of the work of adult educators (compared to other professional groups) and greater social recognition, allowing a professionalisation process to emerge.

But not all aspects of the *modern conception of professionalism* have a clear, solid translation and in this case we may be looking at a 'new professionalism' (Afonso, 2008, pp. 76–77) interwoven with contradictory tendencies. For adult educators, the recent establishment of professional associations (such as organisations for competence recognition, validation and certification officials and graduates in education) is just one example of an ambiguous *professional* condition. Other examples are: the still largely inconsistent attempts to create a code of ethics; the multiple cultures and professional identities that can be found, linked to the internal contexts of the organisations hiring these professionals; and the critical reflection on this topic in forums, seminars and specialised publications, which is

as yet rare and poorly systematised. Furthermore, there is the fact that, in relation to professional autonomy and the creation of conditions to achieve it, the work of adult educators is becoming increasingly technical because of the funding programmes that support the public services on offer (Reseach voor Beleid, 2008). Against this backdrop, it seems that conditions are being created that make this profession difficult, and they are even emphasising the dimensions that are debilitating the burgeoning process of professionalisation. Among them are the popularisation of human resources management principles that favour the assessment of the work accomplished according to ambitious targets set by public policies, and the value put on the intervention of adult educators in the context of economic policies that use adult education and training to promote greater competitiveness, whilst ignoring the more humanist and radical principles of adult education.

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