

Adult education outside schools

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Introduction

In Portugal, like in other countries, the field of adult education is characterised by diversity (CANÁRIO, 1999:13-14). Including a wide range of educational practices, activities developed present distinct aims, methods and participants and are promoted by several institutions, which are more or less directly involved in adult education. Moreover, we may find different professionals' profiles. Educators, trainers and animators organise and lead initiatives supported by conceptual frameworks sometimes divergent from each other.

In spite of the diversity, there are similarities in these practices, in terms of structure, format and educational purpose. On the whole, formal, non-formal or informal education processes can be found, although no hard lines of demarcation exist among them. By formal education, Licínio C. Lima *et al.* (1988:239-240) mean actions organised with a specific sequence. In general terms, initiatives present a precise structure and a detailed study plan. Those involved develop different roles: teachers have the knowledge and teach, but students lack information and competencies and are supposed to learn. In most cases, formal education provides a certificate that represents a specific level of studies. The best examples of the formal education processes are activities developed in schools or initiatives that follow the school model.

Furthermore, informal education involves all educational possibilities lived by people. It is a permanent process that lacks organisation (LIMA *et al.*, 1988:240), it doesn't have educational aims but implies a behavioural change produced by contextual elements. In fact, informal education happens due to secondary effects of people's actions (PAIN, 1990:81), in situations where teachers and students may not be found.

Between these two degrees, lying in the *continuum* from formal to informal, there is non-formal education. Despite the existence of a certain structure and organisation, initiatives don't present a dominant shape or have fixed time and space (LIMA *et al.*, 1988:239-240). In spite of not being a recognised network, non-formal education includes organised activities outside the formal system intended to serve specific learning needs of particular subgroups. In some cases, initiatives may be organised in institutions other than schools; they can take place during the day or late in the evening. Sometimes there can be specific rules of organisation and activities may lead to a certificate, but it is flexible in terms of contents and groups. It serves people of all ages and in different situations in life, from socially excluded to highly trained (COOMBS, 1989:58).

Due to these characteristics, non-formal education fosters flexible learning environments. Mostly devoted to social and educational intervention, community and local development, it aims to raise social and cultural awareness and encourage people to improve their living conditions. According to J. C. Bock and C. M. Bock (1989:65), non-formal education has the potential to achieve goals that formal education has failed to accomplish or was never designed to achieve.

The pedagogical methods implied make non-formal education more active, as it is learner-centred (and not teacher centred). Generally, it is concrete rather than abstract and theoretical (RADCLIFFE & COLLETTA, 1989:61). Methods used are intended to raise adults' participation and

also general involvement in everyday life. Therefore, adults assume the development of several tasks, looking for a gradual change in educational and social attitudes.

The dominant teacher *versus* student's shape existing in schools is replaced by others presenting different patterns. For instance, participants joining activities present different roles. Adult educators are facilitators, motivators or engaged activists of a cultural cause, searching for involvement of people in local communities. Trainees join activities on a voluntary basis, looking for knowledge and competencies but also for occupation of leisure times or solidarity. They may not be defined by age but by interest, opportunity, inclination and experience rather than formal certification and training (RADCLIFFE & COLLETTA, 1989:61).

Another main difference between formal and non-formal education is related with the institutions involved. In formal education, schools and other similar institutions achieve an important number of initiatives, like literacy programmes for adults, recurrent education, vocational training to prepare people for work or to re-qualify them and accomplishment of compulsory education. Most of these initiatives are lead by professionals with specific qualifications, chosen by public departments and most of times paid by government funding.

Thus, one may find a large number of organisations like popular associations¹ acting in non-formal education. Apart from traditional adult education initiatives, social and cultural animation, leisure times activities and local and community development are promoted, which may or may not be supported by the State. If not, these institutions are contexts for distinct educational practices, breaking the dichotomy existing between educational and non-educational institutions (CANÁRIO, 1999:17).

In non-formal education, popular associations present a special interest, as they have been considered fundamental in the promotion of adult education. These institutions have strong traditions in educational and social intervention activities in local communities. As their establishment was mostly the result of popular initiative, they are also important instruments in the promotion of democracy (NORBECK, 1984), but in these *late modern* times they are facing new problems. Besides the historical lack of funding and technical resources, one of the main difficulties faced is related to the promotion of individual participation and processes to ensure this involvement. Trying to review practices and to rethink the relationship between the State and civil society, Licínio C. Lima (2001:3) argues that 'Most popular associations now appear to be facing a crisis'.

The research project

Bearing this in mind, a research was defined to identify and analyse educational processes initiated by adults in different social and cultural areas. To achieve these goals, the 'Popularly Initiated Adult Education Project'² was established³. The main objectives are the identification and analysis of

¹ Although there is a discussion about the designation and nature of popular associations made by several authors like Lima and Erasmie (1982), Lima (1984) and Norbeck (1984), by this expression we mean the "democratic associations for development" identified by Afonso (1989:82). These organisations were created by popular initiative and are characterised by the promotion of specific symbols and codes, supported by institutions like the State, the church or relevant local actors. In this text a distinction is made between non-profit making associations (non-governmental organisations that provide several kinds of social, cultural, animation, sports activities, among others, for people of any age) and private charitable institutions (non-governmental organisations able to make contracts, protocols, agreements, etc. with the State to provide social services like elderly care, kindergarten, leisure activities for youngsters, etc.).

² The research project Popularly Initiated Adult Education (PIAE) was initially developed by three European Universities: University of Linköping/Centre for Adult Educators – Sweden, University of

non-formal education and training programmes. It aims at finding innovative ways of devising, commencing and carrying out training, in which participants do the organising themselves or, at least, play an active role in various areas such as selecting goals and contents, creating or adapting learning methods and strategies, producing their own materials, establishing working and assessment rules, among others (GUIMARÃES, SILVA & SANCHO, 1998:48).

Up until now this research has led to the implementation of:

- a) A national inquiry to institutions or projects that develop (or developed) educational, social and cultural interventions for and by adults. This inquiry was based on a questionnaire that sought to identify innovative popularly initiated adult education activities⁴. Three hundred and fifty questionnaires were sent in January 1998 and eighty-two were answered. These documents contained important information about institutions or projects and activities that had been or were being implemented;
- b) A *forum* held in September 1998 in which 48 institutions presented innovative adult education initiatives. During this event it was possible to discuss some features of these activities;
- c) Four case studies⁵ developed in four different popular associations in 1999 and 2000. These case studies were based on innovative practices and included analysis of pedagogical and organisational aspects.

Some significant results

Data gathered showed us that the institutions inquired were most of the times born from local group practices. People having a political, social, cultural or professional role at a local level constituted these groups. They wanted to face new educational and social challenges. Educators, trainers and animators, but also people worried about community and local development, joined together and tried to solve everyday life problems coming up with new solutions and procedures for old problems.

These institutions were mostly non-profit making associations and private charitable institutions, founded after 1986. If 1974, when the Democratic Revolution occurred, meant the beginning of an important phase in the development of educational and democratic practices, 1986 was a significant year as Portugal became a member of the European Economic Community (EEC). Besides of having access to important funding programmes, being an EEC country favoured the achievement of a large number of initiatives and other ways of devising adult education (SILVA, 1990:37).

Cork/Centre of Adult and Continuing Education - Ireland and University of Minho/Unit for Adult Education – Portugal and it was funded by the Socrates Programme. The Portuguese research team is constituted by Licínio C. Lima, Amélia Vitória Sancho, Paula Guimarães from the Unit for Adult Education and Almerindo Janela Afonso from the Institute of Education and Psychology of the University of Minho; Luís Rothes from the Superior School of Education/Polytechnical Institute of Oporto; Olívia Santos Silva and Maria Augusta Trigueiro, both members of the national agency for adult education and training (Agência Nacional de Educação e Formação de Adultos).

³ The project was established in 1997 and still is being developed.

⁴ The questionnaire was composed by 48 questions that intended to characterise the institutions or projects, to identify innovative activities promoted and to analyse educational and training actions in terms of conception, design, management and evaluation.

⁵ These case studies were developed in four popular associations in the North of Portugal: Associação Cultural de Educação Popular, in Viana do Castelo (ROCHA, 2000), Associação para o Desenvolvimento das Comunidades Locais, in Guimarães (SILVA, 2000), Centro Social de Juventude de Mar, in Esposende (SANCHO, 2000) and Universidade do Autodidacta e da Terceira Idade, in Porto (ROTHES, 2000).

Structured by boards of directors, financial departments and general assemblies, these institutions were in many cases spaces of socialisation and active participation from its most motivated members. In spite of the formal shape evident in a large number of popular associations, this structure hid innovative ways of implementing activities that lacked organisational formalisation. Problems, needs and decisions were discussed and solutions were the result of global efforts.

These institutions organised different kinds of activities in the adult education field like training, teaching, social actions and local development as well as leisure time initiatives created and participated by and with adults. Local authorities, mostly town halls, funded activities, as well as European Union programmes and the Portuguese Employment and Vocational Training Institute. If during the period from 1974 to 1976 a central department stimulated adult education practices, based on a national policy that was implemented at a regional level depending on local needs, nowadays most of the institutions inquired organise on their own educational and training activities. In this sense, in Portugal like in other countries it was possible to identify the importance given by some of these institutions to set community development programmes. These were pragmatically conceived and less politically understood as funding to activities was (and still is) regulated by the State or the European Union (GUIMARÃES & SANCHO, 2000:8).

The majority of these institutions had volunteer board members but paid animators and technical advisors as well as in-house training staff. In some situations paid external training staff joined activities as voluntary ones. In fact, one could notice an emergent tendency to have 'professional' popular associations, especially the largest organisations that provided activities for children, youngsters and elderly. In some cases, their members saw these organisations almost as enterprises establishing social services for clients and forgetting some adult education principles.

In general terms, the educational activities developed by these institutions showed different aims, contents and methods. The development of these initiatives were the responsibility of these institutions, supported (or not) by other organisations. Although showing diversity, one could find two major kinds of educational activities implemented: professional training for the unemployed or women socially excluded, as well as more general actions. This research provided the identification of a large number of educational experiences, showing a variety of problems, needs and solutions that were lacking theoretical unity. In this sense there isn't 'one best way' for adult education in Portugal at the moment.

As to the most innovative activities, most institutions presented educational proposals that were based on the adults' wish of social and cultural transformation. Most of these actions were courses, but also projects, competitions, drama and music, initial and general training, among others. One could also find programmes with the purpose of raising awareness and also developing advanced training.

In most cases, emphasis was put on combination between theory and practice and pedagogical methods promoted trainee's action. The aims of the initiatives were the development of skills and attitudes, the improvement of cultural, social and political possibilities and the achievement of activities towards the workplace. These institutions were responsible for the definition of goals and contents, in partnership with other institutions or trainees, most of these objectives pragmatically (and not politically) defined (GUIMARÃES, SILVA & SANCHO, 1998:95).

These activities were promoted by the institutions that answered the questionnaire or in partnership with others, within the framework of national or international programmes, at a local or regional level, most of the times on a daily basis. Town halls, Employment and Professional Training Institute and local committees for adult education provided funding. In fact, this research showed a more

complex role developed by popular associations, as a strong link was being built among education, training and employment public policies. Not only there was an effort to seek public support and funding, but also institutions' legitimation and formal recognition.

Trainees were characterised by the diversity, mostly young adults, women, long-term unemployed⁶ and people looking for their first job or for knowledge and competencies. The trainers had previous experience in the kind of activities developed and others had specific academic qualifications or certified pedagogical competence. The heterogeneity of both groups (trainees and trainers) was another significant aspect of non-formal education actions developed in popular associations.

Some concluding comments

Data gathered showed that non-formal education in Portugal, especially actions developed by popular associations, included different practices. In spite of the importance of the State's educational initiatives for adults, other activities were being achieved. When compared to the formal system, new contents, approaches and methods were being developed.

New ways of 'thinking' adult education seemed to be emerging. Different educational activities were described and a new pedagogy was arising in popular associations. Among other pedagogical principles, one can stress the importance of the relationship between theory and practice and a strong wish of linking training to the local labour market. Also local reality was most of the times the basis for knowledge and a socially useful curriculum was a concern, even if sometimes aims of these actions were not always clear. In some initiatives it was possible to find a link between the educational process and the system of production, especially those funded by the Employment and Professional Training Institute. Relevance of self-organisation by learners was also important evidence (GUIMARÃES & SANCHO, 2000:8).

When compared to formal education initiatives, these mentioned in this text were less structured actions, oriented to the promotion of specific tasks and skills. Flexible timing and different spaces for non-formal education were being established and people tried to solve locally based needs that couldn't be supplied by the formal system. On balance, we may argue that adult education in popular associations was not just for the poor, what could be understood according to P. Coombs (1989:58) to 'an inferior ersatz substitute for the real thing', but it served different groups.

While popular associations represented flexible learning environments closer to adults' educational needs, they also seemed to be facing some dangers. One of the most significant was the fact that these institutions developed different ways of participating in the definition of educational and social policies, but new strategies of social and organisational dependence were being built. Partnerships were established with several public departments, from social welfare to formal adult education. Apart from these facts, application to national or European Union programmes became fundamental to their survival. Finding funding was one of the most important tasks achieved. Their projects and social recognition depended on competence to present credible proposals and to find new areas to intervene, even if these were traditional welfare state sectors, like elderly, kindergarten care or leisure time activities.

Surprisingly, adult non-formal education has not really been considered in the national educational plan of the Ministry of Education, nor has it been considered a necessary piece in the democratisation of democracy (LIMA, 1996:292). In spite of being highly diversified, initiatives did not

⁶ People unemployed for more than one year.

belong to a public set of provisions that could increasingly serve the evolving and changing learning needs of all groups. In the future, these tasks could be developed by the national agency for adult education and training (Agência Nacional de Educação e Formação de Adultos) constituted in 1999.

As we referred before, adult non-formal education has not been seen as an important area and it could easily become a fragmented sector, depending on different orientations, on national and European Union policies and funding programmes. Even if total control is not necessary and not acceptable, we believe that the State should take its social and educational responsibilities, especially when a sector like adult education with strong impact in democratisation, promotion of human rights and establishment of a fair society is being considered (LIMA, 1996:293). One should avoid the idea that non-formal education may become a 'surrogate welfare program concealing unemployment in second-chance expectations, a cooling-out mechanism to counter the aspiration of formal schooling' in the words of D. J. Radcliffe and N.J. Colletta (1989:60). The establishment of a flexible network that may combine the existing formal activities and non-formal ones is needed. Though it is important that this 'new' system may keep the emphasis on social and cultural transformation.

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