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Learning to Have a Life. How a local development association and its adult learners cope with this challenge

Paula Guimarães, University of Minho – Unit for Adult Education, pco@uea.uminho.pt
Maria de Lourdes Dionísio, University of Minho – Institute of Education and Psychology, mldionisio@iep.uminho.pt

1. Introduction

In recent times, one faces the emergence of shifts, even if still ambiguous and diffuse, in the relationships between the State, the market and the civil society. Although these changes may also be assessed from the point of view of the market and/or the civil society, in this paper we would like to stress shifts in the State itself. For this purpose, we will support our analysis in Roger Dale's argument that the State, namely the Welfare State that expressed a specific intervention pattern up until the 1970s in western pluralistic democracies, in the last decades has been evidencing erosion mainly as a result of globalisation. Considering the referred understanding, this erosion is becoming clearer by emptying the State intervention in terms of public services provision and financing; from a State that was «doing everything» to a pattern of intervention oriented to «coordinate the coordination», a task meanwhile influenced by other levels besides the national one. Therefore, the mentioned author argues that nowadays one can find a State that is not in its original place, a State suffering from ectopia (Dale, 2005: 56).

In education, these changes have given way to deviations and/or responsibilities transfers to higher decision levels, as it has been occurring with the European Union, among other international organisations, and to lower action levels, namely by the involvement of other actors from the civil society or the market. Expressing the impact of global tendencies, these shifts have emphasised the individual responsibility for choices and educational pathways, responsibilities that in the past were essentially public and State funded, but are now object of minimum financing and giving of support, favouring a State profile that is characterised by a not-direct intervention in initiatives implemented (Dale, 2005: 55).

One of the most relevant impacts of these changes is linked to the governance of the educational systems. If by governing one understands the determination of rules by which the Government agenda is establish; the definition of meaningful strategies and interests as well as national preferences that may express the main ideas of the majority; the identification of means for compromise and their coordination, the choosing of which departments and whom will act in order to accomplish compromises, the justification of such choices and the making of these

choices acceptable to the public opinion, there has been «indirect effects» in several dimensions of the educational systems, among others, in the reconfiguration on the governance pattern. These shifts are to be felt in terms of activities developed, namely in what financing, supplying, regulation and property is concerned; in terms of forms of social coordination, in what the relation between the State, the market, the community and the family matters; and in terms of the level of intervention, being it national, supranational or even sub-national. According to Roger Dale, these changes have allowed the State to perform a role not so much centred in detaining control (as it is not the only provider of public services), but oriented especially towards the regulation of processes (Dale, 2005: 53-60).

Some other arguments are considered in this paper such as the emergence of “new” educational forms and actors, that may be visible in new pedagogic approaches and in the involvement of other institutions, namely from the civil society and from the third sector that have been promoting adult education initiatives.

2. Changes and policy discourses

Licínio C. Lima discusses that changes in the pattern and the role of the State are also to be related to the use of a new language in educational policy discourses, specifically in adult education (including the nowadays praised new ideas/meanings to old words/concepts). Those shifts concerning language express a change of focus from lifelong education to lifelong learning. If one considers lifelong education, namely in the approach suggested by UNESCO, it was one of the social and educational founding pillars of the Welfare State, supported by an agenda oriented towards public provision, equality of opportunities, assuming as main aim the awareness and autonomy of citizens as well as social transformation, by the exercise of an active and critical citizenship. Following this thinking, education tends to be mainly represented as: a way for favouring systematic efforts, deliberated initiatives, strategic decisions rationally planned, in the context of formal social organisations that may become learning; to sum up as being centred in formal and non formal education contexts, in spite of the fact that informal education is considered omnipresent in the adults’ life (Lima, 2003: 131).

In what lifelong learning is concerned, it seems mainly oriented towards adaptation, employability and the production of competitive advantages in the global market, in the frame of the crisis of the Welfare State and the erosion of its role in education, with the correspondent reinforcement of individual responsibilities for knowledge acquisition and the development of

«competencies to compete» (Lima, 2003: 129). Following this argument, learning embraces a behavioural and individual meaning, being an outcome of formal or non formal education but also of experiential situations, unintentional and unstructured as a result of social experience throughout the life course of each individual. Therefore, learning seems to be a consequence of life, the outcome of primary and secondary socialization, not being framed or having explicit aims, a result of trial and error, of action and reflection; and without learning it would be impossible to survive in social contexts framed by minimum complexity (Lima, 2003: 131).

3. Policy discourses and reconfiguration of lifelong learning by different (local) actors

Since the 25th of April of 1974 the field of adult education in Portugal has shown some progresses; however, the process of expansion and realization of educational rights of the adult population seems to be slow, even expressing improvements and delays. From these, one should stress the increasing importance of learning and the lesser relevance of education, supported by discourses that emphasise educational policies since the 1990s and the emergence of new roles of the State (further from the Welfare State traditional tasks), even if hybridisms may be identified in what these changes may be concerned (Lima, 2003: 143).

Of course those shifts have to be related with the impact of European Union directives in the adult education national actions, namely by its lifelong learning policy and the programmes associated. Lifelong learning has been forming the focus of policy statements and measures adopted becoming a political shortcut for the modernising of the economy and of education and training systems often associated with attempts to increase competitiveness and innovation at a time of intensifying global trading pressures.

In what adult education is concerned, there might be several degrees of appropriation of supranational and national policy discourses and decisions by local actors, especially if we consider that there are many different actors involved in the development of provision right now. In fact, European Union and national adult education policies have emphasised the relevance of other institutions than State departments and State dependent organisations to provide adult education initiatives. Owing to the adult education tradition in promoting democratic dynamics (and the promotion of discussion between more autonomous and emancipated citizens) but also within the frame of the re-definition of the State, civil society organisations, namely these that come from the *third sector*, have been stimulated to implement adult education provision according to applications to national (and supranational) programmes. These governance

changes have had: i) an impact in what the supranational direction is concerned, showing the European Union also as a relevant actor, in terms of definition of an agenda and in the way this agenda deals with problems and challenges faced by local actors (being these organisations or individuals); ii) a distinct pattern of intervention of the State, which has favoured the establishment of organisations acting in the field of adult education but also institutions that regulate provision within the development of the adult education and training policy; iii) an increasing involvement of the civil society (and the market), specifically associations/non-governmental organizations usually called the *third sector*, that are given the task of promoting adult education initiatives, namely basic education initiatives, allowing to be regarded as extensions of the State itself (Lima & Afonso, 2006).

When one looks at local communities, one of the most significant impacts is this call into action upon local actors, namely if we consider the construction of the individuals in what new knowledges and new literacies are concerned; in what concerns policy discourses they seem to be impelled to develop new forms of reading and writing their own lives in order to still have a life.

4. The research project

Aiming at characterising and interpreting the re-appropriation of the adult education policy (specifically the Adult Education and Training Courses orientations and rules) by local actors, the Unit for Adult Education of the University of Minho developed a research project called *Trans...Formar para Agir*¹ based on a case study of Adult Education and Training Courses held from 2001 to 2005 by a local development association (non-profit making organisation). The goals of this research were: to acknowledge the association in organisational terms and to study main decisions in what adult education and training policy concerns; to study the working pattern as well as the pedagogic approach of the professionals' teams involved in the Adult Education and Training Courses; to characterise the training implemented in what aims and main contents/issues matters; to compare the main orientation expressed by the General Directorate responsible for this form of provision and pedagogic approach and methods selected in the referred Courses by trainers and other staff; to evaluate the (personal, social and organisational) impact of such Courses in the association and also in trainees' lives. Several data collection

¹ The project title it is a game of words. The word *Formar* means *Training* but can also mean *Form*. Putting the prefix *Trans*, an association between *training* and *transforming* was made: *Trans... Train/Form to Act*.

techniques were used, namely document analysis and interviews to professionals and trainees (see Castro *et al.*, 2007). The data collected in this research project contributed to the raise of questions such as: how is this responsabilisation discursively expressed by the agents of these adult education initiatives? What are the components of that capacity of being employable? How and what for do adult learners respond to this responsibility? How do adults perceive and try to adjust to this new work and learning order? What differences education and training brings to these adult learners' lives?

Data discussed in this paper was the outcome of semi-structured interviews to professionals in adult education and trainees of Adult Education and Training Courses (five women and five men from whom nine achieved successfully their education and training path) aged 21 to 45 years old. Interviews included several questions on these trainees (age, gender, professional experience and school certification possessed before joining the Courses), on the Courses (that were related to commerce, welfare support, gardening, information and communication technologies), on the training process and on the meanings these Courses had for these trainees (the way these trainees involved themselves in training, changes and transformations experienced, etc.). All trainees answered to questions previously established and some other were asked when answers were not clear enough for the interviewer.

The analysis of data collected allowed the establishment of a set of representations on the Adult Education and Training Courses, on the trainees themselves and on their life paths, allowing the re-construction of some dimensions of their lives that were identified as relevant by the trainees. This analysis was complemented by the discussion of John Field (2006) according to which lifelong learning is supported by a general acceptance that school (primary and secondary education) is not enough when individuals are facing determinant challenges in a ever changing information and knowledge society. This lack of adjustment between school and risks of life and of society have been impelling the development of education policies that try to articulate education, training, economy, employment, work and social inclusion. Therefore, apart from the incessant effort to face risks, lifelong learning also hides problems and challenges. Lifelong learning seems to have an increasing influence in education but also in cultural, political and social spheres of the collective life, namely by policies and programmes that shape it, in terms of content, but also institutions, processes and educational practices being implemented. It is being supported in a steady flow of official documents and policy statements, several programmes and

materials that are intended to be a stream to learning activities throughout the lifespan. Therefore,

“There are strong signs that this combined flood of official pronouncements and learning programmes is matched by growing evidence of a broad and general acceptance that a one-off close of school and college will not serve to get you through life’s many challenges and opportunities.” (Field, 2006:1).

But how do learners express these changes and the need to learn?

[...] when we walked in here we felt down, completely down, and we leaved this place feeling up. Because I think we feel that we are better prepared to face... we walked in here, we had a low self-esteem because many doors were closed when we knocked. When we leave this place we feel high, better prepared, trusting in ourselves. [E(FDO)1]

In general, trainees enjoy the Adult Education and Training Courses and they express it by saying that their past was a time in which something was lacking, something was missing. To join the referred training allowed o kind of a regeneration of theses adults as they agree that they feel more prepared to face changes and problems in their lives and in their worlds. If lifelong learning seems to be a good intention, even if dependent upon a rather narrower agenda, namely the development of a more productive and efficient workforce, there are other problems and difficulties that have to be considered. Apart from the emergence of increasing competitiveness and productivity, John Field (2006: 1-8) argues that there are at least four aspects that have to be considered when analysing lifelong learning.

I need learning to be a different person

The first one is that life is not linear as it used to be in the past, which forces us to learn life long. Given the constancy of change and readjustments through our life span, and because of an even more constant talk of change and flexibility, an ability to acquire new skills, ideas and aptitudes is not going to emancipate and empower on its own – but it is a absolute precondition. We see this reflected in individuals’ behaviour, which is increasingly reflexive and conditional as was referred by several learners.

[...] when you are 14 you want to have friends, to be with them; you miss classes, you don’t want to be in school neither learning [...]. Afterwards, as time goes by, you face the difficulties of finding a job; without education it is very complicated. [E(FDO)1]

[...] now I listen to the TV and I know what is being said. There are many things that one listens and one doesn't know what it means, isn't it? Now it is different. Well, I don't understand everything but many things are familiar to me now. [E(FDO)7]

These Courses seem to represent an opportunity of learning new knowledge and skills, more relevant for contemporary challenges but also of learning social skills that help adults to become different people and to have different identity(ies). But this stress on changes (to become more prepared to life in general and to work in specific) does not always find eco on local transformations (namely at the economic level).

New meanings for my experience and my new identity

According to John Field, there has been a silent explosion in informal and self-directed learning, sparked off by the frictions that people experience as a result of continuing transformations in their lives and identities (Field, 2006: 4). This *silent explosion* seems to be driven by economic changes that are not always evident to local actors; however there are cultural, social and political circumstances in which people create meaning and experience transformation and have implications in the way adults behave as lifelong learners. Besides, late modernity is characterised by the requirement placed upon individuals and institutions to reflect upon what they know in order to make their choices about who they are and how they behave (Field, 2006: 4-5). If we consider learners representations, namely those related to new pedagogical approaches that stress learning and the development of competencies, it seems that the mentioned Courses impel adults to a deep reflection upon their lives and to a general re-considering of their roles as workers and citizens.

I wrote everything down and it was the start to develop myself more... I tried to get an interior strength that I didn't know it existed in me. Afterwards I have been trying to get it every time I need it in my life... It was the start. It is completely a start, because we learn to live with our past, to live well with it and not to feel anger for those who had a bad past. [E(FDO)1]

The pedagogic approach of these Courses centred on recognition and validation of prior learning and on the development of competencies seems to be responsible for the reflexivity and individualisation of learning. In that sense, adult learners also seem to become more responsible for their future (the world is on their hands as they claimed) although in many occasions they did not consider that their future is not just an outcome of their choices.

To be included or excluded

A third aspect is that lifelong learning seems also to be a mechanism for social inclusion as it is argued in policy documents but also to exclude and control. If it may empower people by raising awareness and reflection upon life, it may also create new and powerful inequalities due to two key-shifts: i) the move towards the knowledge-based society in which those who have the lowest levels of skills and weakest capacity for constant updating are less and less likely to find paid employment, particularly of sustainable and reasonable secure type; and ii) the general development of reflexive individualisation, in terms of access to social support mechanisms – from immediate social relationships to welfare systems – that is constantly being weakened or made conditional which can be reflected by the authoritarian and coercive discourse on training and development (Field, 2006: 5-6). These discourses are more evident when educators and trainers are asked to express their feelings on these Courses and on how adult-learners react for instance to welfare support.

There were learners that accomplished these Courses and then they were back to their homes and everything turned to be as it was before joining the Courses. [...] Training is not enough. [...] there must be some kind of follow up. Otherwise, this is a single answer, so single that nothing seems to change, isn't it? [...] There should be something after these Courses, some institution, some department that may help these people finding jobs... we teach them but obviously we can't teach them everything. [E(M)3]

These Courses are not something nice that you voluntarily follow. They are an imposition. [...] The user was benefiting from social welfare and when attending these Courses is benefiting from a grant. [E(M)2]

Therefore, the way out of social exclusion for some trainees may be an intriguing pathway, more difficult than challenging, more obligatory than pleasant. In this frame, training may be a way out of unemployment and a “free-pass” for a “new” life but it may also be an impelling strategy for a more complex set of inequalities, even more complicated to overpass.

New ways of thinking and new ways of doing

The fourth and last aspect is related to the fact that lifelong learning is a new concept, a new way of doing education and training, giving way to a generation of learning disposals in settings (traditionally or not) devoted to learning. In this context, the nature of the contract between institutionally-provided learning seems to be changing; and also a variety of informal everyday

learning is undertaken by individuals. Therefore, publicly-funded providers, among these non-governmental organisations such as the one studied, are confronted with considerable challenges in what equity, public-good and local community issues for instance are concerned (Field, 2006: 6-8).

We have done many exercises that were a way for us to understand contents, we have made draws and other stuff. [...] With games, by playing, we understood everything. What in a regular school could become more complicated, because there we spent all day long watching figures and all that stuff; it was not like here. By drawing, performing exercises, doing leaflets and other stuff we learned maths in a different way. [E(FDO)3]

If the pedagogic approach of these Courses is innovative in what concerns time and learning disposals, the non-governmental organisations that implement them are also to be considered a new setting, a new place for learning; and this was a relevant issue for trainees as they considered these organisations to be closer to them than school (at least the school they knew as children or youngsters). However, the role of such organisations in adult education and in local communities has to be reflected: if not schools (characterised by formal education disposals, State control and funding, etc.) what are the aims and strategies of such organisations and what is the meaning of their involvement in adult education (both for trainees and for local communities in general)?

5. Some concluding remarks

In this paper we tried to sustain shifts in the nature and pattern of intervention of the State having in mind that these can be observed in State action and in policy discourses (both in national and supranational levels). Even if diffuse and subtle, these changes may be tackled in the way trainees conceived themselves as learners and as citizens in a world that is getting new shapes and revealing other problems and challenges. Data collected in the research project under analysis, namely those obtained by interviews to trainees and adult education professionals showed that adults after joining the Adult Education and Training Courses seem to share the wide consensus of the need of learning (throughout life) to face new opportunities in the knowledge society, becoming different citizens, more capable and skilled. Of course this difference can be expressed by meanings adults give to experience and new identities created (maybe more coherent but maybe more fragmented than ever before). These meanings may be

very much related to new ways of thinking and new ways of doing education and training; however they may not be enough to help people to “make the right choice”, the choice that would be the difference between being included or excluded. That’s why we believe that although there has been a shift in focus from lifelong education to lifelong learning, a change that involves many others in what conceptions and practices in adult education are concerned; it would probably be wise to keep to Licínio C. Lima’s suggestion. His argument is that the shift from education to learning should not be exclusively oriented in one way; it should be relevant for life throughout learning, a learning that would be able to use both hands (the right hand of education and the left hand of learning). Following this set of reasons, “(...) *it is possible that an education that is ambidexter and plural, able of crossing and integrating knowledge, may benefit from creative tensions from, on one hand, the expertness of a right hand that is so right handed and learned that it can evilly transform itself in pure habit, adjustment and domestication; and, on the other, of the making of a difference of a left hand apparently more decentred from the task to be achieved, clumsy, incapable, that less knowledgeable and skilled is more free and curious to learn.*” (Lima, 2003: 146).

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