

Lifelong Learning and Well-Being: “Between the desirable and the possible”.

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Abstract

This paper presents preliminary results carried out and treated more extensively in the research project that is being developed in the field of Adult Education in Portugal¹. From the biographical interviews carried out from two adults who are attending the Education and Training Courses (ETC) in two different areas of the city of Loulé, in southern Portugal, we show the results regarding the impact of the training they attend (ETC Courses) in the sense of "subjective well-being" experiencing (or not).

Introduction

It is known that in Portugal the level of education and training of the population differs from the great majority of European countries. This lack of qualifications is a genuine obstacle to economic growth, welfare and the quality of life.

Within the social sphere, education and training "are decisive factors in the evolution and important social cohesion, a source of renewal of individuals and the community" (CNE, 2011:6). It is in this context and in a perspective of Lifelong Learning (LL), that there are, currently in this country, conditions of learning and training in addition to providing opportunities for adults to obtain a higher level of education, and it still gives them the opportunity to acquire new skills that can be used both in personal and social contexts, as well as in a professional level, which supposedly will allow them to perceive better life, here designated as the subjective well-being. It is in this amplified view on knowledge, recognizing the LL as valid, rethinking their goals and methodologies, addressing the answer of the needs of the individual in the community that "learning is being part of regeneration" (Portela, 2012). In this way, the diversity and flexibility of the educational proposals, more appropriate to the specificity of the adult audience in Portugal have been gradually boosting the schooling of adults.

Considering the increasing use of the concept of subjective well-being in the sense that "if you expect people to live their lives so that they themselves feel satisfied, according to its own criteria" (Galinha & Ribeiro, 2005:212) interested in asking: (i) How do the adults involved in the Education and Training Courses perceive the idea of well-being? (ii) To what extent does the training they attend contribute to their feeling of integration, success, in short, their happiness? (iii) The relationship between increased training and quality of life ("well-being") will be a reality or a utopia?

Therefore, this article focuses primarily on identifying and understanding the impact of training in the promotion of subjective well-being in adults who attend the ETC Courses.

Literature review: Lifelong Learning and Education and Training

The concept of Lifelong Learning (LL) emerges in order to respond to paradigmatic changes in today's society and as a consequence of the need for continuous learning.

Although the concept of LL is "extremely confusing" (Jarvis, 2004:64) in the document created and established by the Commission under the European Employment Strategy, namely the Memorandum of Lifelong Learning that we find a definition which outstands the aim of our study, where LL is defined as "any learning activity, with a goal, undertaken on an ongoing basis and to improve the knowledge, skills and competencies" (CCE, 2000:3).

In this context, the LL does not mean only "a technical or legal term with a precise meaning, but rather a change in the meaning of education provided by a body, versus an individualized learning, and places great emphasis on learning experience individual" (Quintas, 2008:17).

How well infer Lima & Guimarães (2011:31) LL "also invests in some devices and processes of education and training that are more open, flexible, individualized, socially relevant, if individually significant, not to mention atypical in the case of actions where learning is central".

Thus, the LL is not only one aspect of education and training, but also becomes the guiding principle for provision and participation across the continuum of learning in different contexts. It is this perspective that the Education and Training Courses (ETC) can be considered the way to go toward this Lifelong Learning.

On the Portuguese context, the ETC have been oriented to create an opportunity for people who, were mostly denied access to educational offerings, that is, adults with low levels of schooling. These “educational offerings are perceived as useful to society, contributing to greater accessibility to education and greater social justice”(Portela, 2012). Therefore, the ETC arise as a type of education and training in which the experiential learning facilitates the assignment of meaning and construction of new learning and it is one of the practices that Portugal resorts to the consolidation of national strategies concerning education and training.

It should be noted that the purpose of educational offerings that are available for this specific population considers the characteristics of a country where the vast majority of the population lives in disadvantage conditions, economic and social.

Adult Education and Subjective Well-Being

In the current economic and social situation in which we live, the concept of well-being has been emphatically addressed by several authors. Witness of that is the variety of published works, in Portugal (see Cruz, et al, 2009; Galinha, 2008;) and abroad (see Field, 2009a, 2009b; Diener et al, 2009; Diener et al, 2010).

The subjective well-being can be perceived “as an evaluative reaction of people to their own lives, both in terms of satisfaction with it, both in terms of affection” (Jesus, 2009: 15). In this context, defining the “good life [was] to be called ‘subjective well-being’ (SWB) and Sometimes in colloquial terms is labeled ‘happiness’” (*id.*, *ibid.*).

In the educational field, more specifically in adult education, the concept has started to stand out and be developed in research. This is the case of a recent research conducted in Portugal, on the impact of the process of Recognition of

Prior Learning (RPL) in adults' lives (see Portela, 2012), where it was identified that, even in the current context of crisis and decline of communities, recovery which is given to learning increases after completion of the process of RPL. In this study, the impact of the process of RPL in personal development was measured by an increase in perceptions of adults, suggesting greater awareness of skills, greater self-worth and self-confidence and greater motivation to participate in other activities of LL. It was also verified, according to the author, the development of citizenship skills and greater integration into the community.

For Field (2009b: 11) there is “evidence on the relationship between learning and well-being, as well as on the impact of learning on factors help to promote well-being”. There is also the idea that “the process of learning appear in interaction between people, and between individuals and experiences” (Jarvis, 2004:83).

It seems to us that it is partly as a result of this interaction that adult education can be a play key in the promotion of subjective well-being they experience.

Research method

The methodology chosen for this study was justified because it allowed participants to identify “experiences, knowledge [and] modes of learning” (Cornejo, 2006:101).

Conceived as a “social construction” biography “integrates both the social reality of the subjects and the world (...) as your knowledge and experience which is constantly affirmed and transformed” (Apitzsch and Siouti, 2007:5).

For Egger (1995:119) the “biographies have also been used in the field of adult education to develop and analyze the processes of lifelong learning”. Still, according to the author, there are “many different ways and methods created so they built a ‘cultural biography’, which shows certain circumstances the course of life”.

According to Alheit (1995:63) “we have a biographical background knowledge with which we are able to fill out and utilize to the full social space in which we

move". Thus, the "biography itself has become a field of learning" with great potential and should be considered to understand the "unlived life" (*ibid.*: 59-64).

That said, the biographical interviews give us a personal view of each individual, about the contexts in which they live, their social and professional experiences, as well as the elements that constitute the way these people relate to their own learning process.

Therefore, in this study, were held biographical interviews to adults who attend the ETC Courses in order to understand whether their participation in this process of education / training contributed to a greater subjective well-being of adults.

Mary is 37 years old, is married and she has one son. She was born in Funchal, Madeira Island, Portugal, where she lived, studied and completed the 6th grade. During her school career, she failed the 3th grade due to low performance. Later in the 7th grade she quitted school to go to work and help her mother. She moved at age 18 to Loulé, where she took the 9th grade with equivalence to a Technical Administrative Course. She works as an administrative assistant in a company in the area of safety and hygiene. She is currently completing the 12th grade ETC Course and is in search of access to higher education through the process over 23² to do the course in Business Administration.

For Mary the attendance of the ETC Course was an opportunity to increase her level of schooling: *"It is a help for those people who have no other way to get the 12th grade"*. To Mary, there was the acquisition of new skills in the course, including reading, writing and speaking: *"The reading helped me (...) encouraged me to read more books, which I did, but very little. Now I read more books. I'm better at writing too. And talking to the clients ... especially in the Portuguese language ... I have now a richer vocabulary and that reflects positively in my work place"*.

She even indicates that the increase in her training helped to improve her quality of life: *"Yes, contributed. Mainly financially. And, on a personal level, in the interaction, talking to people, having an attitude (...) Therefore, we can make*

a conversation with a person who has culture, we can have a conversation as it should be. This helps, right?"

Regarding her perception about her well-being Mary believes that being happy is the key: *"I think mainly is to be happy. Happiness is seeing that we get along in life with people who we like and move on".*

Anthony is 44 years old and was born in the Angolan city of Nova Lisboa in Africa. Currently he lives in Quarteira with his wife and his nine year old son. After returning to Portugal, he continued his studies into the 1th grade of video-conferencing school. However, he had some learning difficulties and he quitted school. Anthony also says he had to leave school to go to work. After attending and finishing his 9th grade in an Education and Training Courses (ETC), he is now finishing his 12th grade through the same program. He is a warehouse worker but he believes that finishing his 12th grade can be beneficial: to get a better job, specifically one which is better paid and which could improve his family's life. *"The objective is to improve the quality of our lives and also to benefit my family's well-being. Otherwise this would be a waste of time".*

Anthony mentions that the ETC has helped him acquire competencies and has also benefited him in his workplace: *"Without a doubt. For example, in dealing with people, in this case we have to speak languages. There! I know English and this has helped me a lot. All the competencies I am acquiring, or learning, or relearning, or remembering, I use them in everyday situations. Both in resolving problems and conflicts, as in communication".*

He says that to feel happy is something anybody can achieve: *"Happiness can be created by any person. I am with my wife because I like to be, I am happy. I have a son because we wanted one, I am happy. I have a house because I worked to make that happen, I studied and continue to study to improve my life, I am happy. Happiness is always being created. We make ourselves happy, we create this. Nothing comes to me if I don't make it happen. I currently consider myself to be a happy person".*

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the biographies presented here, leads us to some reflections. The first one is that even in a superficial analysis they show us that adults in this study perceive the idea of well-being relating it to the idea of happiness, and they stress the importance of the relationships they establish with others. The second is that Anthony and Mary justify the impact of ETC Courses attending in their well-being, with the skills that were acquired during the training. We still consider important to mention the similarity between the educational background and training of Anthony and Mary (both failed in previous years and dropped out of school) and that, despite the early vulnerabilities and the experience of some events that could be traumatic, both showed great resilience, which may also have contributed to make them feel motivated to pursue better living conditions. In this sense we can say that:

- In either case we studied, we have perceptions which indicate that the ETC Courses has improved and contributed positively to the acquisition and development of skills of adults, which have become an added value to their lives. For Field (2009a: 21) “learning appears to promote skills - particularly non-cognitive skills, including confidence - that lead to positive well-being”. Mary, for example, notes that the richer vocabulary and the much easier use the Portuguese language skills to express herself were abilities developed which have largely contributed to her performance in the workplace.

- The ETC Courses have been a good bet to help people who had no opportunity to complete a teaching degree and/or left school. Our adults reported that the increased educational level has a positive effect in relation to the well-being and quality of life. Anthony, for example, points out that, through a greater level of education there is a greater chance of getting a better job and ensure favorable conditions for quality of life. Field (2009b:14) argues that “at least in its significance to the community in general well-being is an important result for adult learning”.

- In a publication of the New Economics Foundation (2009:46) social relations are seen as “critical to our well-being” and “well-being is increased by life goals associated with family, friends, social and political life”. As for our study it became evident that the well-being is directly linked to personal and social

relationships that these adults establish with family and other people. These relationships have contributed very significantly to make them feel happy, which has a very positive effect on their lives.

Therefore, we can conclude that the Education and Training Courses have beneficial results in personal development, social integration and quality of life. These biographies show us that, the Lifelong Learning can be a way to develop subjective well-being in people's lives, which in the case of this study was a reality experienced and felt by everyone.

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Footnotes

¹ Research project within the Master of Science in Education and Training, University of Algarve, Portugal, and which is entitled: “The Problem of the Dropout of the Education and Training Courses: an exploratory study in a municipality in the Algarve – Portugal”.

² Process that assesses the ability at frequency to attend the Higher Courses for people that has aged more a 23 years old and who are not holders of higher qualifications.