ESREA Network on Between Global and Local: Adult Learning and Development

LOCAL CHANGE, SOCIAL ACTIONS AND ADULT LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

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PROCEEDINGS

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Integrating Higher Education in Middle Adulthood. Paths to Empowerment: Struggle and Self-accomplishment

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Abstract. This paper is based on an on-going study case that is being carried out at an Higher Education School in Portugal. The study is focused in undergraduate students who were "older than 23 years"[71] when they enrolled in Higher Education and the data used was collected from structured interviews and focus group discussions.

Higher Education students face a number of challenges in contemporaneous post-industrial and semi-peripheral societies. In Portugal, the uncertainties of a labour market characterised by high unemployment rates and budget cuts that reduced investment in science, research and education have caused difficulties to both students and teachers. The problems and challenges are even greater for non-traditional students who re-enter the education system after an absence of several years. In this paper we discuss some preliminary results of this study case namely: their perceptions of Higher Education, among which we target the consequences of integrating higher education on their personal, social and professional development; the processes of their integration; the processes of their empowerment and transformation. With respect to the integration processes, our scope is to discuss the impact caused by these students on the educative community through civic participation, academic engagement, group formation and general sociability. Furthermore, we explore these students' current learning strategies and their plans for future improvement, as well as their expectations of the impact of completing an academic degree to their lives, their children's school life and their families' lives as a whole.

Keywords: Adult Education, Transformative Learning, Experience, Community

Introduction

Every year, several groups of students that have long ago left school for different reasons, enter Higher Education institutions to start or to complete their studies. They are non-traditional students that want to fulfill their dreams of pursuing a professional career, but often find themselves somehow displaced there. By non-traditional students we mean the individuals that have interrupted their formal education after compulsory school due to financial, societal or other personal reasons, often these students are included in less-favored socioeconomic groups[72].

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[71] Portuguese common designation for non-traditional students who want to re-entry into Higher Education.
[72] This definition follows the one developed in the project TSER (Target Socio-Economic Research Programme) University Adult Access Policies and Practices across the European Union and their Consequences for the Participation of non-traditional Students; and also used in the Socrates Grundtvig LIHE – Learning in Higer Education Project (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/cll/research/lihe

According to their own testimonies, friends and colleagues but specially the Internet was the resource for checking out scholarship opportunities in their local area of residence or interest. One aspect that seems to have a huge impact on their decision to enroll in Higher Education as well as in the way they interact in the academic context is a former participation in social movements (feminist, associative, cultural, trade unions, etc.). All the representations and relationships they have built, the messages they have exchanged, the forms of mediation they have engaged in before, act for them as potential indicators of the educational value of intergenerational relationships and of the personal, professional and community impact of a process of adult education. Once integrated, adding to the difficulties faced by the other "regular" students (how to use academic knowledge and how to master a scientific language), these students also have to deal with the problem of understanding how to use their own previous work and social experience. As Mezirow (1997) mentioned: *A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. Facilitating such understanding is the cardinal goal of adult education*. To be able to fully integrate in the educative community and to identify themselves as higher education students, middle adulthood students have to find ways to incorporate their previous meaningful experiences in the learning activities they are now involved in (Stryker, 1980; Pinto, 1991). Critical reflection on experience is the key to transformational learning. Having an experience is not enough to achieve a transformation. What is valuable is not the experience itself but "the intellectual growth that follows the process of reflecting on experience. Effective learning does not follow from a positive experience but from effective reflection" (Merriam 2004). Furthermore, in the representations of common sense, student appears as a concept we don't question, a social construct used to define a particular stage of life, that involves the frequency of a Higher Education institution. At the same time, nowadays, people are expected to meet certain demands but have not always been treated as social actors in their own right. What is certain is that student, as a concept, encompasses an extremely heterogeneous social group. Student's situations vary widely according to their place of residence (urban or rural), household socio–economic status (low–income or high–income), age subgroup, level of education and gender (Bourdieu 2004).

With this paper we aim to draw attention to a research project currently under way in the School of Higher Education of Porto Polytechnic Institute[73]. Entitled "*Learning to Learn*", this project is integrated in the Academic Work Support Group (GATA) and seeks to understand the multiplicity of processes that exist in and give shape to the multidimensional phenomena of integration of students in Higher Education. Ever since the implementation of the Bologna Process directives, research on the construction of an academic knowledge by Higher Education students has been carried out, focusing on graduate and postgraduate studies, study plans, the learning paths of the students and other topics that have been the object of analysis in the works of Costa & Lopes (2008), Diniz & Almeida, (2005), Fernandes (2001), among others. In the same manner, the emergence of special enrolment schemes for adult students (in Portugal, regulated by the legal documents DL 64/2006 and Lei nº 49/2005) has brought the attention of scholars and institutions to the factors that influence non-traditional adult students' participation in post-secondary education (Kortesoja, 2006), and particularly in higher education (Chen, 2014; Stanistreet, 2013), regarding the tendencies of enrolment, these student experiences (Amorim, 2013), identifying the particular necessities of non-traditional adult students with the purpose to promote pedagogical strategies and curricular programs attractive to these students (Correia e Sarmento, 2003, 2005, 2007).

Based on the perspective that student participation in this project should be motivated, this research project is with students and not about them and it incorporates issues related to the

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[73] Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico (ESE-IPP).

development of citizenship and civic awareness, as a complement to academic training. In parallel to the active involvement of students as researchers of their own daily realities, this project also aims at giving rise to new opportunities for interdisciplinary reflection, at contributing with concrete interventions in the transition and integration processes of the students and at developing strategies which will improve their academic performance.

Furthermore this project incorporates issues related to the development of citizenship and civic awareness, as a complement to academic training. This project also aims to give rise to new opportunities for interdisciplinary reflection, at contributing with concrete interventions in the transition and integration processes of the students and at developing strategies which will improve their academic performance. To interrogate how these pathways are developed in order to integrate and clarify how it generalizes, the Portuguese concept of "Older than 23", to understand the student practices, their aims, rituals, personal and collective characteristics as well as their cultures, requires also interdisciplinary approaches in different areas of knowledge such as Psychology, Philosophy, Sociology, Arts and Sports.

Older than 23 years: alternative learning cycles

To speak about alternative learning cycles, if we can consider under this broad designation students "older than 23 years", means to face the inequality and asymmetry that characterizes the Portuguese reality. But not only. Transversely to the concept of alternative cycles there seems to be, nowadays, a dual conflict, particularly strong either on the different places where education is debated or in the educational institutions and in political and legislative discourses. Each one of these dimensions is supported by and supports a certain educational common sense, which can hardly be separated from the educational mandates that determine the Education as a whole (Berger, 2009)[74]. Such dual vision deeply conflicting, even if it is not always clearly assumed, refers to the coexistence of ideological perspectives on educational realities such as:

    i)   The backlash of the Right to Education, an integral Education for all, under the inclusive perspective that sees it as an inalienable Human Right (Delors, 1996)

    ii)   The pursuit of academic excellence following an elitist conception linked to the exclusion of a large majority and focused on the refinement of selection procedures.

In this framework, these people feel somehow compelled by life and by their professional environment to follow studies beyond "compulsory education", making higher education a new phase of a *de facto* compulsory training needed to achieve their minimum standard goals in life – has been so often rigidly ranged and listed: in a certain phase and a certain life cycle; like a differentiation by specialization, underlined by the expression "doutor" (differently from the use in UK and other European societies, in Portugal there's a traditional use of calling everyone with a basic academic degree as "doutor", or referring to people with an academic degree as "doutor"). In this sense, all education, very especially Higher Education, is formulated almost exclusively as *education just for a few*, for a "*numerus clausus*", and as the concretization of a certain social scaling.

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[74] As Peter Berger says about common sense – discourses (scientific) educative: "Social Sciences research processes tend to be always re-elaboration, re-interpretation processes around phenomena that we all experience" (2009).

We consider adequate the analysis that shows that forcing the opposition between equality and exclusivity hampers the necessary balance between a demanding learning, that must be preserved, and the need for a massive qualification for all, in an equalitarian perspective (Correia, 2000). In a country with a qualification deficit, it becomes imperative to fight the tendency to increasing inequality that, in the end, affects always the same social groups (Mendes, 2011: 83).

When the opening of vacancies for "older than 23" becomes more and more relevant in the Portuguese Higher Education System, it becomes clear that a whole set of representations, contributing to the situation we describe in this text, interferes with the ways to access education and with the process of skills development on non-school territories, affects the balance between different forms of contact with knowledge, makes more difficult not only the adaptation to new realities and new contexts, but also any social claim or civic participation.

These are some of the dimensions that may be interesting in the study of this particular context, precisely because they highlight the effect of different life experiences in the consolidated academic praxis. Alternative cycles that produce an inversion of the usual perspective in research: instead of starting from inside the academic narrative to look outside, we start from the outside world to look at the interior of the academy.

Expectations and projections

In this context, it is noted that students "older than 23" occupy a position in contrast with others:

- they often preserve a view about mobility in the social scale as something to be highly valued and celebrated;

- they usually have ways of participation, of interaction and of claiming much different than the ones of their colleagues[75];

- they combine, in a way somehow contradictory, a certain attitude of quietness, in submission to the institutional norms and uses, with the exercise of replying, a great desire to learn and know things and a great enthusiasm for anything new.

This scenario can find its justification in the context of a sudden and abrupt interaction of these students with a different cultural field, with new established rules, sometimes ancestral rules as are the ones of the academy, where their social interactions are reshaped, sometimes reiterating them, sometimes overrunning power logics established long ago. As if the social fields, as Bourdieu (1989) would say, were being reorganized in these students in a seismic way. Their action and their justification scope can move considerably between the most conventional regulation and the demand for transformation.

Academic Work Support Group (G.A.T.A.)

The work developed with students in the scope of G.A.T.A. (set up at the initiative of the Technical-Scientific Unit (UTC) of Education Sciences with the contribution of the UTCs of

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[75] It's necessary to say, in what concerns this aspect that this study started with social education students, which privileges a specific profile.

Sports Science, Psychology, Visual Arts and Music) aims to strengthen the cooperation between students and teachers in relation to the academic work and the integration of students in Polytechnic Higher Education. In that context, it has emerged the need to consider the social, cultural and experiential plurality of the different generation groups that each year start their studies at ESE-IPP and to understand their motivation, personal and professional paths and their expectations and constraints. This is considered a necessity we defend that the singularity and complexity of their knowledge – not formally structured – should not affect learning negatively but should, on the contrary, add value to that process in a constant, conscious and mobilising way. Many of these students' representations of Higher Education and formal academic work do not correspond to the reality experienced daily at the institution and, in that sense, it seems to us that it is of the utmost importance to listen and to involve the students in the processes that concern them and to foster cooperation in matters of academic work. Realising this also means to understand that the institution must have the necessary scientific and pedagogical capacity to reflect and to supervise to guarantee academic success integrated in a personal and social development process. Having that in mind, the work of this group materialises itself with the implementation of different strategies of supervising students, such as fostering communication and interdisciplinary relations, maximising the effort of the various social, psychological and administrative support structures provided by the institution, facilitating individual support online and, also, the construction of the collective project called "Learning to Learn".

Project Design

This project has two objectives, both related with its dual purpose: research and intervention.

i) The first general objective is the strengthening of an effective and emancipatory integration of students in the academia. Along that line, actions are taken to promote the understanding of the value of knowledge, the use of linguistic codes specific to the academic context as well as the development of strategies that contribute to an improvement of the academic performance of students.

ii) The second general objective has to do with understanding the difficulties and potentials that exist in the processes of transition/integration of students. That implies understanding or becoming aware of the representations and expectations of student at the time of entering Higher Education, the difficulties of adapting to the demands of academia (curricular articulation of courses, scientific rigour, etc.) and the difficulties pointed out by students in respect to academic work (recommended reading and autonomous research, time management, structure and writing of articles, amongst others).

Summing up our multidimensional approach to the integration processes, we have defined three dimensions of analysis:

•   Cognitive and learning dimension – In which we explore students' current strategies of learning and possible intention of changing them. In conjunction with students, we critically reflect upon the difficulties and potentials of such strategies and propose new pedagogical strategies;

•   Personal and social development dimension – In which we explore the motivations and expectations of students when they enter Higher Education, as well as their accomplishments when they integrate the institution. We focus on personal and civic development and on the importance of the social relations that are established and the sociability experienced.

•   Learning resources and their use dimension – In which we explore information and communication technologies and the importance of mastering foreign languages.

Methodological Framework and Project Scheduling

In this research, our approach is rooted in the perspectives of the grounded theory (Glaser n' Strauss, 1967 in Charmaz, 2007) which drawing on the anthropological tradition, defend the interconnectivity between theoretical construction and empirical data, emphasize the importance of observation and detailed profound analysis of data with the purpose of developing theoretical hypothesis.

These are the goals that guide the current research, previous to which we assumed only a few premises regarding the conception of education and its social functions, and the multidimensionality of the concept of social integration.

On the first subject, we defend both the humanistic and the critical perspective, assuming education must not only focus on the experience and development of learners but furthermore explore their potential in the promotion of social change (Carvalho, 1999). This focus on experience, personal and social development implies, firstly, to center the learning and teaching processes on the students, as a group and in each student, as an individual, and secondly, to value the students' previous experience, to promote opportunities of practical and collaborative learning, promoting critical and autonomous thinking. To explore the learners' potential as change makers requires, not only, the development of a learning process that contributes for an experience based knowledge grounded on social context, as well as reflection moments upon these experiences that allow points of view to be constructed and might promote action upon these social contexts (Smith et al, 2008; Parente, Costa e Diogo, 2013).

On the second, we state that Higher Education has assumed "a symbolic value that places it in the field of aspirations of large groups of young people" (Fernandes, 2001), is included in the basic education and training system and therefore constitutes a relevant factor on the institutional domain of social integration. This understanding draws upon a perspective of social integration as set of multidimensional processes that are inscribed in a dual movement of insertion – adaptation of the individual to society and inclusion – creation of individual opportunities through the democratization of social structures. Based on this perspective, we take under consideration the structural conditions that frame the integration of Higher Education students, as well as the motivations, representations, strategies and trajectories of the students (Amaro, 2000; Costa, 2008).

This is a longitudinal study case involving graduate students of Social Education (daytime and after-labour period), Basic Education and Sports Sciences.

Data collection techniques: Documentary analysis; observation; interview and questionnaire surveys; focus group.

The data collection instruments were drafted by the first year students of Social Education on the curricular unit of Socio-educational Research Methodologies. This process was very interesting as students could learn how to build a questionnaire to inquiry their own realities. In their own words: *like that we could understand better how to make an interview or a questionnaire, how to build a research project. We could realize in practice what research means. How to inquire, or try to know more about a subject that we thought we were aware*.

<u>In the first stage of our study</u>, with an exploratory nature, observation was used as well as a survey to 13 students that entered ESE-IPP under the "Older than 23 years" special program.

Our focus groups were organized with students who entered higher education under normal and special schemes in the graduate courses of Basic Education (49 students), Sports Science (18 students) and Social Education (62 students).

So far, at this stage, the following topics were explored: academic and professional paths; family situation; sociability and initiation rituals; time management issues; access to information and communication technologies; survival techniques associated with social and academic change; and constraints arising from educational policies.

Exploring these topics allowed us to establish a general diagnosis of the context under study.

<u>In a second stage,</u> students of the different courses which were not yet surveyed will answer our survey questionnaires.

<u>Scheduling</u>: From 2013 to 2016. This option will allow us to implicate students throughout the totality of their training period and it will give us a perception of their evolution.

Preliminary results

In respect to motivation to enter higher education, students refer several reasons: i) academic and professional (obtaining a Higher Education degree, scientific and professional development, labour integration and upward social mobility); ii) personal development and satisfaction (getting a wider vision of the world, developing their intellectual capacities); iii) vocational (having a clear calling to study a given subject); iv) social (serving as an example to their children).

When asked to evaluate their experience in Higher Education and to compare it with their expectations, students emphasize personal fulfilment ("it is a dream come true"), personal growth, the investment they made as well as the opportunities to learn.

Various types of challenges were mentioned by the students: i) physical, with regard to time management (both between study and personal time and, particularly, to having time to conduct group works) and to oscillatory movements; ii) management of financial burdens, aggravated by the reduction of the number of scholarships granted; iii) psychological, regarding management of emotions and feelings; iv) social, with respect to the enlargement of their social networks and spaces where they can socialise; v) and professional, with regard to the difficulties to reconcile labour and academic responsibilities.

In line with the results from previous researches (Fernandes, 2001), we see that relationships are the most valued aspect of the students' experience in higher education − it has even been referred that "school is our second home" and "we spend more time with colleagues and teachers than with our family". Students explain that it is the interaction with teachers and colleagues, from the same or from different years, that allows them to establish relationships of help and collaboration that will lead to a better structuring of their practices.

As far as study methods are concerned, we found out that students use as main strategies: i) reading; ii) taking notes in classes and reading them; iii) solving problems (training); iv) memorizing texts; v) writing summaries; vi) using the Moodle platform and doing research. This tendency reveals a path that will render more difficult the construction of knowledge through reflective and critical learning.

Final remarks

Student's enrolment in academic context calls out for research development at least in three different dimensions:

- students' ability to incorporate new academic work into their prior knowledge and experience;

- students' representations of knowledge and power;

- relationships between students and teachers, students and other students, and students and communities.

The present study, still in an early stage, allows some hypotheses among which:

- in an undeniably empowering journey non-traditional students have an increased value on their academic life;

- it is possible to develop a very rich intergerational dialogue that we have not yet explored.

The dialogue between formal education contexts and communities is reinforced, in the sense that knowledge institutions deepen their role of democratization, broadening their inclusion of *others.* This final aspect depends on a future phase of intervention that will combine social intervention and scientific discourses in a symbiotic effort for the improvement of academic practices, student integration and development.

Acknowledgements

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