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Adult education and women in Portugal: a review of the literature 2012-2016

Elisabete Correia BRITO¹, Marta ABELHA², Manuela Barreto NUNES³

¹University of Porto, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Sociology, Oporto, Portugal, Email: elisabete.brito@gmail.com

²Univ. Portucalense, Portucalense Institute for Human Development – INPP, Oporto, Portugal, Email: mabelha@upt.pt

³Univ. Portucalense, Portucalense Institute for Legal Research – IJP, Oporto, Portugal, Email: mnunes@upt.pt

Abstract

Between 1999 and 2011 a national program of adult's education and training was developed in Portugal. This program was the subject of around 200 scientific publications, 20 of them centered on the impact of the courses in women and specifically regarding the promotion of information literacy competencies. The present paper intends to analyze those publications, aiming to characterize them and identify the results that were achieved regarding the assessment and impact of the courses in the students' lives. The methods applied coincide with the ones of a literature review, including bibliographic search and retrieval and content and bibliometric analysis. Results show that although little attention is given by the scientific community to this subject, the impact on the lives of the women that attended the courses is significant and worthy of further investment and development.

Keywords: Adult education, Women, EFA courses - Portugal

Introduction

In the beginning of the last decade of the 18th century, the French philosopher Condorcet defended in his *Cinq mémoires sur l'instruction publique* (1994), as well in the *Rapport et Projet de décret sur l'instruction publique* (1989) the idea of lifelong learning, and therefore adult education which, in the context of universal education, he considers fundamental conditions of democracy: a way of ensuring that every citizen can participate in the civil life, perform at his best in his profession, in rural economies as well as in urban, and finally take enlightened part in politics and public decision making. Condorcet gives particular importance to the learning of women, whom he thinks should have the same civil rights as men, and that the inclusion of the equality of rights in the nation's Constitution is a condition for its development and a genuinely inclusive democracy (1847): thus being one of the pioneers of the fight for women's civil rights and one of the founding fathers of democracy as we now understand it.

Nonetheless, it took more than a century since Condorcet's statements to see adult education regarded as a serious question by governments and politicians: right after the 1st, but mainly after the 2nd world war it started to be considered as an essential part of the welfare state and therefore laws, regulations and programs began to be promulgated and developed all over the world, regarding two different points of view: one humanist, which prevailed during the 1960 and 1970 decades, and the other economicist, which appears to have gained strength in our present society (Field, 2001).

Portugal, a country marked by a fascist dictatorship during most of the 20th century, arrived at the last quarter of the century with a substantial rate of illiteracy (around 25%), having the mandatory and free education for eight years been only introduced in 1973, one year before the carnations revolution. Since the revolution, the public policies of



adult education were marked by discontinuity, though the first years assisted to cultural and educational campaigns developed mainly in the rural and hinterland areas by the General Direction of Continuing Education, following, not the perspective of literacy in itself, but particularly the one of promoting popular culture and, through the valorization of the population's own knowledge, place culture and education at their service (Melo & Benavente, 1976).

After several years of intermittent policies, in 1998 a government of the Socialist Party formed a task force for the development of adult education and training, through which a national program of adult education was developed aiming to cross certified education with lifelong learning, especially professional training (ANEFA. GMEFA, 2001). As a result of this policy, educational centers were created all over the country to develop courses of adults' education and training, the so called EFA courses; the program endured between 1999 and 2011, when it was suddenly closed by the new government of the coalition between the Social-Democratic Party and the People's Party, which implemented rigorous austerity policies in all domains. In 2016, with the Socialist Party again in the government, the adult education policy was resumed and a new program (*Qualifica*) for adults' qualification was applied with the goals of promoting the productivity, innovation and growth of the country through the development of learning and professional competencies in people who couldn't conclude the mandatory formal education or need to develop new skills (ANQEP, 2016).

The adult education and training policy and the consequential programs applied during the last 18 years were based on theoretical principals, and their results studied and evaluated by professionals and researchers, resulting in scientific publications. In special, the EFA courses developed through the late *New Opportunities* program resulted in around 200 publications, according to the Scientific Open Access Repositories of Portugal portal (RCAAP) and a search in Google Scholar using the descriptor "Cursos EFA" (EFA courses). Namely, information literacy questions and the impact of the courses in women with low incomes who didn't succeed in the mandatory formal education were also subject to several studies. Between 2012, the first year of the closing of the New Opportunities program, and 2016, how many documents considering the EFA courses and their impact on women and the promotion of information literacy were published? Who studied them, what were the results?

Departing from a research conducted on the subject and concluded in 2011 by Brito (2012), and with the primary goal of providing useful information for the development of the new *Qualifica* programs, the present paper intends to analyze those publications, aiming to identify the results that were achieved in terms of assessment and impact of the courses in the women's lives; other goals deal with the identification of the academic institutions where those works were developed, the type of publications and the research fields that led to the particular researches, the most influential authors and the network of citations and collaboration between authors and institutions, if they exist.

Method

Literature review was used as a method for this study. A systematic research was conducted in RCAAP, a complete portal to access Portuguese academic publications and, as RCAAP doesn't yet cover all the scientific journals published in the country, also in Google Scholar. Although the Portuguese scientific literature, mainly in the Social Sciences fields, is not very well represented in the most important international indexing databases, a search was also conducted in Web of Science, looking for papers published in highly recognized journals. The search was



chronologically limited between the years of 2012 and 2016 and the following keywords were used: “Educação de adultos” (Adult education), to define the field, and then, adding the boolean expression “AND”, the terms “Cursos EFA” (EFA courses), “Mulheres” (Women) and “Literacia” (Information literacy). The term “Feminino” (Feminine) was also used with the Boolean expression OR to achieve more significant results. Compliance with the terms used for the search and the effective correspondence to the content of the documents retrieved was analyzed. Subsequently the documents were subject to a bibliometric analysis, and finally, a content analysis allowed a comparative review of the selected documents. The focus was a constructivist analysis in the natural context of a qualitative approach. Accordingly, the primary concern of the present study is related to the deepening of the comprehension of the social context and the impacts of adults’ education and training in the individuals, understanding the socializing practices acquired over the courses, more than looking for a representation of practices. It is therefore intended to comprehend, represent and explain this social phenomenon.

The combined results gathered from the diverse sources were subject to a triangulation analysis, though we’re referring to different types of documents, such as grey literature (master and doctoral thesis), journal articles and conference papers. It is important to mention that this research theme has been gaining importance over the years, due to the crescent accessibility of the documents, issued from different theoretical principles and developed in distinct academic institutions and research centers. The referred triangulation consists, therefore, in the combination of different points of view, subject approaches and technics of data gathering and analysis, and it is such diversity that allows the presentation, as a final result, of a more faithful portrait of the educational contexts in the study.

This literature review around the subject of adult education in Portugal takes into consideration two sub-subjects present in several studies: information literacy and the women’s universe, hence being also natural to integrate the analysis in the field of women’s studies, approaching the constructivist vision to the transformativist paradigm, as defined by Mertens (2005) . The publications that were subject to the present analysis result mostly of qualitative researches with similar data gathering technics and, upon that link, connection points with the interpretative study that forms the basis of this comparative analysis were built. The findings are therefore the consequence of the considerations of some of the authors, but also of the discourses in the first person of the actors that were the subjects of the compared studies.

Findings

A first search of the Web of Science (WoS) using the expression “adult education”, limited to the years 2012 to 2016 and refined according to the WoS categories Education - Educational Research, Education - Scientific Disciplines and Information Science - Library Science led to the retrieval of 676 resources that present the term either on the title, the abstract or the keywords, showing that adult education is not a trendy subject in the area of Education and Library Science. The H index of these publications is also small (H7), attending the most cited work only 26 citations. In fact, 482 (71%) of the retrieved resources have 0 quotes within the universe of Web of Science, and merely 151 were cited more than once. In the studied set of four years, 2015 was the most productive one, with 203 publications, followed by 2016 (168); 2012 and 2013 reveal an apparent period of little concern with the subject, presenting in total 167 publications. The document types are mainly journal articles (337) followed closely by conference papers (294). However, the source that shows a bigger impact of adult education as a content is a series of conference proceedings (Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, with 90 resources), followed by two journals



specialized in adult education (Adult Education Quarterly and Adult Education in Universities: Local and Regional Perspectives, respectively with 53 and 40 resources).

Regarding the Portuguese language, two Brazilian journals appear on the set of the 25 strongest publications on adult education: Olhares (13) and Laplage em Revista (7). The country where the subject is mostly object of scientific studies, in the context of sources indexed by WoS, is the USA (97), followed by Romania (61) and Canada (60). Portugal appears in 14th place in this ranking, with 18 resources published between 2012 and 2016. The type of documents is shared in almost equal percentage by journal articles (9) and conference papers (8), with only one editorial, this one referring to a monographic number of the Brazilian journal Laplage em Revista, from where most of the retrieved resources were indexed – in fact, 7 of the 9 journal articles on the theme were published by the same number of the same journal; as for the conference proceedings, only two stand slightly out: EDULEARN and ICEEPSY published two papers each in different years. Eight of the resources were published in Portuguese and 10 in the English language: only the English written articles have an impact within Web of Science, which is natural for most Education journals written in Portuguese are not indexed in this bibliographical database, and so only alternative metrics could show their real impact. Attending to the academic institutions that lead the indexed publications on adult education, bibliometric data shows that University of Lisboa (UL) leads with six resources, followed by University of Porto (UP), with four and Univ. of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (UTAD), with three. The most published authors are Barros, from the Institute Piaget of Porto, Ferreira-Loureiro, from UTAD and Cavaco and Guimarães, from the Univ. of Lisbon, these last two working in collaboration – results show that the collaboration between Portuguese academic institutions scarcely exists, being the prevailing collaboration between faculties within the same institution or even endogenous to the same faculty or research center.

As for the particular subjects of this study, three of the results that approach the Portuguese context of adult education address the themes of literacy and only one have women as a subject, with no cross-linking data, and none of them regarding the EFA courses, which are the topics of the primary research the present paper intends to compare with similar studies.

In fact, for the purpose of the present study, Web of Science is of no use, as the above description clearly reveals: the problem of bibliographical databases such as this one is that they are mostly focused on exact sciences and technology or international journals when it comes to the social sciences, which are very much devoted to national realities, where scientific research is meant to have real effect. Thus, if a researcher looks for a mirror of national scientific publications outside the USA and the UK, the best strategy is to recur to national academic repositories or portals or even Google Scholar.

The reflection of Portuguese research regarding the theme of adult education as developed by the EFA courses in the context of women learning and literacy is best given by Google Scholar, where a search with these descriptors linked by the AND Boolean expression and limited by the years 2012 to 2016 retrieved 94 resources. Nevertheless, Google Scholar is not a scientific search engine, and its results report to the full text of the resources, being the information retrieved rather noisy, e.g., not entirely reliable, once it gives back information that doesn't truly study the subjects that we are looking for. A closer look at the abstracts and keywords of each of the resources was then necessary, and 20 resources were finally selected. The search led through RCAAP didn't provide any answers regarding the combination of the three descriptors, which obliged to a more general search using only the expression "Cursos EFA" (EFA courses), being then retrieved 12 resources. In this case, the need of looking for more results led to a subsequent search using the term "educação de adultos" (adult education), until the final number of 14 results was



reached, six less than the ones found in Google Scholar. Finally, 17 documents were selected for the present literature review and bibliometric analysis, which corresponded to the stated criteria: studies centered on the EFA courses from the perspective of women studies and with a particular emphasis on information literacy achievements, published between 2012 and 2016, and based on qualitative methods – mostly case studies with an in-depth analysis.

From those, and as for the document types, most are master (11) or doctoral (3) dissertations; two are articles published in peer-reviewed journals, one is a conference paper and also only one book chapter. The publications correspond to 19 authors, of which 17 are women and only two men, showing that women's studies still are a matter for women's researches. As for the author's affiliations, IPL (Polytechnic Institute of Leiria) and ISCTE-IUL (Lisbon University Institute) are represented by four authors each, followed by the University of Trás-os-Montes) and the University of Minho, both with three authors. The Open University, with two authors and the Universities of Coimbra, Porto and Nova de Lisboa are also represented, the latest with one author each. This lack of visible collaboration is clearly in accordance with the type of publications: mostly academic works that are not divulged through scientific journals or conferences, showing that these are not considered important themes by the academic community. In fact, the citation data provided by Google Scholar reveals that the impact of such texts scarcely exists, for only four of the 19 resources have online registered citations, in a total of five citations, being two of them self-citations, which shows something else: as the works stay mostly as grey literature, there's no dissemination of the knowledge acquired and researchers seem to search with their backs turned to each other, not acknowledging what their colleagues have studied and discovered before them.

Regarding the years of publication, 2014 was the most productive one (6), followed by 2015 (5), having our findings shown that only one work appeared in 2012. Given that these works are mostly the result of master and doctoral thesis, and attending to the fact that those types of publications take from 2 to 4 or 5 years to develop, it is likely to conclude that the first researches began around 8 or 9 years after the New Opportunities program started, when the project had already reached its maturity.

In the next chapter, a compared review of the literature which has been the subject of the above bibliometric analysis will be presented, through a content analysis and discussion of the selected works. Through the exposure of the results, conclusions will be reached and some final recommendations set.

Results, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In order to better understand the role of different scenarios of Adult Education and Training in the lives of Portugal citizens, we have used a comparative analysis of secondary sources obtained through the RCAAP and Google Scholar, in order to identify the research questions, the main issues addressed and the results achieved in terms of assessing the impact of the same on individuals, not on their individuality, but on the intersection of issues between them. It should be noted, first and foremost, that these contexts of schooling and their entire context are spaces of socialization in which each adult individual is the leading actor of his or her learning process.

As such, we focus on those who place particular emphasis on women's studies or where they have a higher incidence in the groups (Brito, 2012; Costa, 2014; Fonseca, 2014, 2016; Raimundo & Caetano, 2015) and on literacy (Brito, 2012; Oliveira, 2014; Pias, 2013; Raimundo, 2015; Silva, 2015; Vargues, 2013). Our starting point is precisely a study, within the framework of a doctoral thesis in Sociology, on "Reading literacy in adults - diachronic analysis of (re) socialization processes in a group of Adult Education and Training, built on the feminine" (Brito, 2012).



This study involves a group of women with unique pathways, but that fit together through some regularities. There is, from the outset, an early drop out of the school (by their own decision), with a family economic dimension underlying, devaluing the school capital to the detriment of the economic one – “I did the 6th year and I know that at the age of 14 I started to work (...) because I saw the others had everything and I did not have the things that I’d like to have” (Brito, 2012, p. 315; Silva, 2015). Paias, in her dissertation on Education, also points out both “personal and family reasons” for this early departure (2013, p. 48). However, in Silva’s research we can also see the existence of precarious financial relationships that, coupled with little parental qualifications, create tensions and it’s the parents themselves that promote this early abandonment (2015).

However, once we have taken up our starting point, low qualifications make access to employment more difficult at one point, which leads to unemployment or even lack of professional progression. The arrival of the EFA course is a turning point in their trajectory, leading them to reflect on the need to obtain more qualifications. Having paid training enabled them to lighten economic needs, to get the 9th-grade school certification and even professional certification: “I got to the point where I saw what I needed. Both at the professional level, but also for me” (2012, p. 335). The same statements appear in Raimundo’s thesis, where the subjects state that the primary motivations for attendance are “increasing school attainment and insertion into the labor market” (2015, p. 686). Fonseca also mentions that women studied “wish to have better jobs in the future” (2014, p. 64). Rodrigues emphasizes the fact that they are beneficiaries of a scholarship and Paias stresses that these adults feel “the desire to improve skills and to increase school qualifications”, giving “personal and social importance to the school diploma” (2016; 2013, p.48). Rocha and Silva add that the reasons presented by the women they studied relate to questions of “personal fulfillment and because they felt due to their lack of qualifications. Only one person stated that she wanted to enter the labor market through training” (2015, p.103), and one of Silva’s study respondents states that “many doors closed for only having the 6th grade. (...) So much that I do not have life goals at this moment” (2015, p. 37).

The image they create around the EFA courses is represented by the school in the past, a schooling learning rooted in theoretical knowledge - “a school like ... the C+S (...). I thought that I would give what I learned in the 7th and 8th grades” or “come back ... to be a child” (Brito, 2012, p. 329; Oliveira, 2014, p.295). In Henriques’s research, there are also some fears of a return to learning - “some fear because I had left school many years ago and I was not sure if my head could still learn something, but I tried and had a lot of willpower” (2014, p.85).

At the beginning of the EFA course, there was a “factor that was transversal to all, which was the lack of self-esteem. They had very low self-esteem (...) what was more noticeable was, basically, the attitudes, the know-how in the room, the knowledge to interact with their colleagues, their organization at work level, their autonomy at the degree of study and also to know how to manage” (Brito, 2012, p.352). Nonetheless, different researches mention an increase in confidence, self-esteem, personal valuation and security, but also a greater capacity for interpretation of information, these courses being the primary drivers of the individual and social growth of these adults (Brito, 2012; Graça, 2015; Henriques, 2014; Oliveira, 2014; Raimundo, 2015; Rocha & Silva, 2015). This is an important milestone in the lives of these adults, mainly because of their discoveries and experiences in acquiring skills - “For having played a little longer, ... having done things I never thought to do. (...) I learned to read stories better to my children, which I did not do” or even because “I can give some help to my children in their homework” (Brito, 2012, p. 319; Henriques, 2014). It is also evident that these courses allow them to gain a different position within the household (Brito, 2012; Raimundo & Caetano, 2015).



During the course, they create other expectations, especially professional ones, taking into account the very development of the training - "to feel that they are important for their lives, placing many expectations on the professional stage after the course is completed" (Fonseca, 2014, pp. 64-65; Sanches, 2015). In reality, "the goal should be to consolidate this kind of skills, but I found that the trainees felt, and I observed myself, that there was no such social or institutional recognition because these opportunities were not given" (Brito, 2012, p. 353). In this sense there are situations of materialization of these expectations and representations with changes in their daily professional lives in institutional families - "I left the course and the next day I started to work" (Idem, p. 341; Henriques, 2014). When in areas other than certification there are elements that go from a situation of the previous inactivity to a situation of work activity (Brito, 2012). Nevertheless, there are also situations where, although there is awareness of a not very favorable scenario, the deception is very evident: "a person already starts to wonder ... it seems that it is not contributing, both financially and ... and then we are at home, ready, but we're not being productive. (...) I already look like an old woman" (Brito, 2012, p.338). The fact that they have more qualifications does not mean that precariousness has been completely eradicated. However, Raimundo speaks of the existence of greater pro-activity in job search after the course (2015).

Within an information society, literacy plays a preponderant role as a key competence for the performance of individuals in different aspects, hence it is essential to understand the importance of the way it works in adult education. As far as literacy is concerned, Brito considers that although these women showed the same level of schooling, they started with unequal levels of literacy, which already happened before the course and this did not allow to establish equity in this sense due to their singularities, based on a close relationship between these difficulties, the feminine gender, their social environment of origin and life stories: "if you read anything you do not understand I already have that ... that perception that I do not understand anything that I'm reading. But at the time I didn't feel that way" (2012, p. 346).

However, with regard to the above-mentioned research, we can see that there are some proficiencies that the EFA course has highlighted, given that these are adults who have long been away from contact with books and, therefore, the notion of reading that still preponderated in their mind was that of a mere mechanical deciphering of the graphic symbols - "I remember reading on a rush ... I was going to catch the train. I could not even breathe" (Brito, 2012, p. 330). Pre-training reading habits in the majority of the group were associated only with daily routines and sporadic readings. Nevertheless, in the adult education scenarios they can break this idea, thus associating themselves with literacy conducts through interactions, sharing, dialogues, senses: "It must have been the only courses, if it was not the only course, where I heard comments about books. I think there was a taste for reading in some of the trainees. (...) I am still to meet the first group that comes to great reading habits because they are people who are adults. At the beginning they do not even have time in their daily life for this or think that they do not" (Idem, p. 350, 354). However, if these skills are not applied day-to-day, especially in the professional context, they become "vulnerable to regression", that is, if individuals do not use them in their daily lives and during their life course, they are blurring and even regressing (Ávila, 2008, p.87).

Regarding these issues, Brito (2012) and Paias (2013) mention the involvement of children in reading activities, which contributes to the consubstantiation of social relations also in the domestic space. The children thus allow them to establish a relationship between the theory acquired and the daily life and that takes them to redeem skills in the area of family literacy, at the level of new representations and reading practices, allowing a greater rapprochement between parents and children: "I learned to read the stories better to my children, which I did not do before" (Brito, 2012, p.319; Oliveira, 2014). There are also influences that are reflected in the family as it allows



them to provide more support to their children also concerning school. The school context is transposed into the domestic space, and the family environment is one of the main drivers: "it is usual for children to help their parents feel proud" (Paías, 2013, p.50). Rocha and Silva consider that, for its uniqueness, EFA courses entail changes in the family, being noticeable in personal growth how these experiences are reflected in the "construction and reconstruction of learners identities" (2015, p. 102).

The building of multiple responses to different audiences is considered as basilar. As such, it is essential to address the teacher's role in these courses and the fact that it cannot be confined to a mere repetition of content regardless the public; teachers must always think about the individuals, not forgetting their sociocultural environment for, after all, they are the basis of all this work, and even because these adults "need to be self-directed; so that the profile of the trainer should be built on the basis of a process of mutual investigation with the trainees and not only with the function of transmission and evaluation of knowledge" (Oliveira, 2014, p.49). It is fundamental to understand non-school contexts as a "laboratory of new practices" (Santos, 2014, pp. 102-103). Nevertheless, it is clear the need for a symbiosis between the trainer and the trainees: "[they] went all away richer, not only in skills that they were bound to acquire to have the B3, but left much richer because there was an entire job done which they also allowed to be done" (Brito, 2012, p.353; Costa, 2014; Santos, 2013). However, we do not always come across these symbiotic relationships (Mesquita, 2012). In fact, the presence of information sharing and cooperative work is central. All this work involves many fractions of availability, "appreciation of multiculturalism", commitment and creativity, primary components to develop in these individuals new durable dispositions that promote literacy levels (Brito, 2012; Fonseca, 2014, p.65).

The studies here analyzed thus reveal that these adult education scenarios play a major role in the lives of these individuals, promoting new opportunities as well as changing values and attitudes and, in general, the acquisition not only of intellectual capital but also of social capital, an indispensable contribution to diminish social inequalities. We cannot overlook that, being mainly composed of a female audience, these non-school contexts give voice to these women and present them challenges that impel them to get involved in a whole range of daily changes and allow an understanding of the world that in many cases they weren't aware of.

In general, these conclusions, all gathered through qualitative studies, are confirmed by a small survey led by Rocha and Cardoso (2016) and presented in a chapter of a book dedicated to adult education in Europe from a gender perspective, edited by Maksimović, Ostroch-Kamińska, Popović, and Bulajić (2016).

It is also evident through the bibliometric findings that, if adult education is not a popular subject in international scientific research, much less are the women studies applied to the subject or the approach through information literacy. The research in Portugal is incipient and with little impact. It is, therefore, a significant field of study for the development of societies, which the authors recommend should be the object of research projects, preferably with public funding, and also of bigger efforts of communication through publication in journals, conferences or books. Collaboration between academic institutions and research centers, looking for international partnerships could be a way of expanding the study field and obtain more consistent results.

As final recommendations, it would be important to try to follow the trajectories of the women that were subject to the compared studies after the end of training, looking for permanent changes in their lives and assessing the long term effects of the courses they attended. In what refers to the new *Qualifica* programs, these results show beyond any doubt the relevance of adult women's education in what refers not only to learning and the acquisition of



professional competencies, but also to the gaining of individual, social and information literacy competencies that lead to the conquest of social capital, empowerment in the private and family life and self-esteem – meaning that the new programs to develop should insist in the particular work with women, according to their needs and to the gender gap that unfortunately still exists in our society.

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