The Portuguese Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy agenda – examining a volatile panacea by means of ethno-phenomenological interpretations[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses some results of a qualitative policy research study whose principal aims were: i) to analyse how sustainable the top-down decisions made on recognition of prior learning (RPL) policies and processes are; ii) to underline some of the local achievements of Portugal's new public policies on adult experiential learning, in operation since the Lisbon Agenda. The analytical policy models proposed by Lima and Guimarães (2011) were used for studying the various educational rationales involved. An ethno-phenomenological approach has been bringing to the fore the perceptions of educational actors, as: i) the weakness of the adult education public offer provision; ii) the vulnerable status of professionals working in the national scene. And a major strength of the experiential approach to learning: it's potential to create opportunities for applying skills to new situations that can be related to education for a sustainable future, as UNESCO urges.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning Practices - Adult Learning and Education Policy - Sustainable Provision – Ethnography – Phenomenology

L'agenda politica portoghese per il riconoscimento degli apprendimenti pregressi: Un'analisi etno-fenomenologica della volatilità di una panacea

Questo articolo presenta i risultati di uno studio qualitativo sulle politiche educative mirato a: 1) analizzare la sostenibilità di processi decisionali 'top-down' nella produzione ed implementazione di politiche per il riconoscimento dell'apprendimento pregresso; 2) porre in evidenza alcuni degli esiti conseguiti a livello locale nell'implementazione di una nuova politica sull'apprendimento esperienziale degli adulti, attivata in Portogallo sulla scia dell'Agenda di Lisbona. Lo schema di analisi adottato per studiare le diverse razionalità educative implicite nei modelli politici è quello proposto da Lima e Guimarães (2011). L'approccio etno-fenomenologico seguito ha facilitato un esame delle percezioni degli attori coinvolti nel processo educativo con riferimento a: 1) i

punti deboli dell'offerta pubblica di educazione degli adulti; e 2) la vulnerabilità professionale di coloro che operano in questo settore. Inoltre, lo studio ha messo in evidenza come l'apprendimento esperienziale abbia rappresentato un punto di forza della politica in questione, per la possibilità di applicare le competenze apprese a nuove situazioni collegabili all'idea di educazione alla sostenibilità sostenuta dall'UNESCO.

Parole chiave: Riconoscimento dell'apprendimento pregresso - Politiche educative - Educazione e apprendimento in età adulta - Educazione sostenibile – Etnografia - Fenomenologia

Introduction

Policies and practices for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) have been developed around the world in the past few years, especially in Europe after the Lisbon Agenda. RPL has been known by different names in the various countries in which it has been adopted, depending on whether it focuses on the principles or the procedures it includes (Pires, 2005). In Portugal it was systematically introduced as public provision in 1999 and was called RVCC - recognition, validation and certification of competences. Since then the adoption of the lifelong learning paradigm (Barros, 2012a) has been predominant in the Portuguese adult learning and education (ALE) governance processes (Marques, 2014).

This article addresses different ways of seeing the political aims and achievements of sustainability on the Portuguese RPL agenda as viewed from the point of view of adult educators and learners involved in the experiential learning process. With this analytical basis the study examined the various educational rationales involved, both in the structures and among the actors in the field, as well as the impact of RPL policy on the promotion of competences like critical thinking, imagining future scenarios and lifestyles, and making decisions in a collaborative way. The general problem studied is also connected with the need to creatively address the new complexity of ALE governance today (Milana & Holford, 2014), and the need to critically examine education policy development in light of recent environmental, economic and social crises. This study documents some important changes within a specific context that are influenced by the Europeanisation of the neoliberal principles in ALE. The main contribution derives from a critical discussion of phenomenological interpretations stemming from the empirical data collected.

We try to identify some hybridisations that emerged from looking at the research results through the lens of the theoretical models adopted. The relevance of this research lies in the specific choice of two RPL centres (with similar characteristics) to address the field in two different periods (2005 and 2011). During these six years' time difference, significant changes in National Boards for the sector[2] occurred. Several fundamental questions could then be raised. We asked three: i) Would these adult educators (from both centres) follow distinct rationales in their practices and

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[2] In the Portuguese policy context several changes have occurred in the National Boards responsible for ALE governance: the first National Board to be created in democratic times was the National Agency for the Education and Training of Adults (ANEFA, was the only one specifically oriented to the ALE sector. It wound up in 2002), then with a (right) turn in Government came the General Directorate for Vocational Training (DGFV, 2002-2005), after that a new political (left) turn happened and the National Qualification Agency was created (ANQ, 2005-2012), and in present moment the stage belongs to the National Qualification Agency for Professional Learning (ANQEP) again as a result of the most recent Government (right) turn.

methodologies for RPL?; ii) Do the adult educators involved in these RPL processes have concerns about producing a change of lifestyle in terms of adult learners' critical and collective awareness?; iii) Have these innovative Portuguese RPL practices[3] been pursuing the goal of contributing to a more sustainable development? And the main research question to be answered in this article was: How did educators manage (and discursively present) the contradictory top-down political priorities in their increasingly insecure educational working contexts for labour?

The main results suggest that there is considerable difficulty in contradicting the (neoliberal) rules of the game, particularly in unstable (and unsustainable) working scenarios. More and more, the framework of the new public policy agenda rationale embraces such priorities as the promotion of employability, competitiveness and economic modernisation. Even so, the rationales observed in the Portuguese RPL context of policy design and practices' implementation are diverse, and it is clear from the contradictory *conceptual elements* that co-exist with different *policy priorities* that they have been playing a role in the contemporary national landscape of ALE and illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon of RPL in precarious times.

This article comprises four parts. The first describes the methodological approach, which combines ethnography and phenomenology. The data collection techniques are described. The second section outlines the research's conceptual framework. The three models used to capture ways of seeing public social policy for ALE proposed by Lima and Guimarães (2011) were revisited as heuristic devices and compared with the Portuguese local/national context of RPL practices in two distinct periods. The third section presents main results and discusses the research findings and the core outcomes of the Portuguese case of RPL, examined from the insiders' viewpoints. Some of the hybridisations in the RPL political priories, the conceptual elements and their implications for sustainability as part of the agenda are highlighted. The final section consists of a critical reflection on the political trajectory of Portuguese ALE and RPL, which seems to have achieved a critical existence point with the dismantling operation that occurred in 2012[4]. This text takes the view that this phenomenon should not prevent us from preparing new policy directions and making recommendations for the rebirth of Portuguese RPL, implemented from now as a more sustainable provision.

Methodology: connecting ethnography and phenomenology to uncover in deep socio-educational conflicts

This study addresses the fieldwork with a qualitative approach. A critical ethnographic-based research design was the method chosen (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Marcus, 1994). Unstructured interviews[5] supplemented by one year continuous participant observation and field notes were used in

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[3] The introduction of RPL practices in Portugal was a major political innovation because until 1999 the ALE public sector was mostly based on a second chance ALE night offer.

[4] In 2012 the New Opportunity Initiative Policy for ALE was completely discontinued. As an immediate consequence more than 450 New Opportunity Centres (the Portuguese places and spaces that allocated the ALE and RPL public practices since 2005) were closed by the actual Government. A new law (Portaria nº 135-A/2013) has appeared and has announced the future establishment of a new kind of Centres (the Qualification and Professional Education Centres).

[5] During one year of fieldwork we conducted 36 open interviews with adult educators and 33 open interviews with adult learners.

2005. In-depth phenomenological interviews[6] were applied afterwards, in 2011. The main reason for adopting this ethno-phenomenological methodology (Van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994) was the depth of understanding that it provides; it is particularly effective at bringing out the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives and interpretations (Hycner, 1985), and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions. Documental political analysis was also undertaken.

A New Opportunities Centre of a Non-Governmental Organization in a rural area in southern Portugal was selected for data collection in 2005. Another New Opportunities Centre of a secondary school, also in a rural area in southern Portugal, was selected for data collection in 2011. This centres, separated in sites, presented similar local context and allowed a time-separated fieldwork design, chosen to see how adult educators acted in the context of changing policy priorities for a 'new educational order', established both nationally (under the Portuguese ALE policies) and supranationally (through European Union funding programmes for the forms of provision under development). This study also aimed to pursue the exploitation, deliberate or otherwise, of adult educators own relative sphere of action in a local context whose potential lies in the possibility of contradicting today's mainstream neoliberal policy guidelines (Arnove, Franz & Torres, 2013), to promote, for example, the idea of sustainability as a core value for educational action, as recommended by UNESCO.

Critical analysis combining content analysis (Grawitz, 1986; Vala, 1986) with critical discourse analysis (Olssen, Codds & O'Neill, 2004) was used for interpreting 69 open interviews, 12 in-depth phenomenological interviews and field notes. The combination of these different techniques (Bacchi, 2000) involved categorical thematic analysis and the search for simple frequency that crosscut all the empirically collected data. The structural analysis of occurrences allowed the identification of associations between specific themes. The content of written policy texts about RPL was analysed through the use of a semi-inductive procedure suggested by Maroy (1997), comprising three steps: immersion in data to facilitate its reduction; codification and systematic comparison in order to organise it; the interpretation of data according to a 'seesaw option' in interpretation[7].

It is important to emphasise that this research project assumes that the reality is complex and heterogeneous, so an effort was made to look for discontinuities and omissions in practitioners' representations and interpretations.

Theoretical tools used by this policy research analysis

The question of how to capture the changing nature of policy and the state today is complex. We selected the three models presented by Lima and Guimarães (2011) to analyse the social policies of

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[6] During two months of fieldwork we conducted 5 in-depth phenomenological interviews with adult educators and 7 with adult learners.

[7] According to Maroy's reasoning (1997: 136), the work achieved in this first stage was a 'seesaw', including classification, actual manipulation and analytical separation of data in order to interpret and give meaning to the information collected. The purpose was to have a specific and clear line for discussion. The idea was to build categories and develop an analysis structure that could be used afterwards. This work would lead to the development of a first series of discussion proposals to be validated afterwards.

ALE. As RPL Policy has been a key element in the contemporary Portuguese agenda of ALE social policies we used these models as heuristic devices to better understand this political scenario and its implications from a sustainability point of view.

The three models were of particular interest to the data discussion. This is mainly a schema consisting of three characterisations of public policy models for ALE: i) *the democratic-emancipatory model*, in which democratic participation and critical education are very important to ALE actions, in particular popular and community education; ii) *the modernisation and state control model*, based on public provision, the intervention of the welfare state and generally dominated by educational guidelines; iii) *the human resources management model*, in search of economic modernisation and the production of skilled labour, led by vocationalist guidelines and focusing on the production of human capital. As the authors put it,

> These models are not mutually exclusive; they can coexist. So cross-fertilisation or hybridisation is possible: rather than presenting rigid artificial possibilities of analysis, we may expect these models to be regarded as heuristic devices for understanding public policies of ALE.
> (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, p.40)

In this study, and using these models as research devices, a key goal was to search backgrounds to explore ideal types of designing and implementing Portuguese RPL policy. This is a major concern for the critical discussion of the meanings of core strains and contradictions discovered empirically, especially regarding two of the four categories developed by the authors' models, namely, the *political priorities* and the *conceptual elements*. By studying certain policy impacts this research draws attention to the contradictions in political priorities and the conceptual hybridisations present in the general scenario of recent Portuguese RPL policy that launched a new adult learning and education strategy in 1999, based on experiential learning discourses and a renewed weight posed on skills. Ironically (or not) this recent strategy was discontinued in 2012, leaving a significant number of adult educators jobless[8] and suddenly abandoning a large number of adults involved in this *panacea type* of RPL processes

The democratic-emancipatory model

One of the most substantial aspects of this model in terms of the *political priority* embraced is the aim of building a democratic and participatory society by means of a fundamental social right – education. As the authors put it, concerns with solidarity, social justice and the common good are important for this and justify the establishment of basic education and education for democratic citizenship programmes. A broad range of initiatives should also be implemented to promote a civic sense and a critical and thoughtful capacity that can be linked with the local exercise of examining the power differentials, patterns of competition and collaboration among the actors in the field of ALE.

Regarding the *conceptual elements* of this model, attention is drawn to the educational (not simply instructional) nature of the initiatives, through which local cultural traditions are respected, accompanied by the adults' own life experience and understanding of the world. Based on ethical and political principles, often associated with research-action projects and participatory research in

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[8] In 2010 there were 11.611 adult educators working in the national network of centres (cf. CNE, 2011).

coordination with programmes backed by social policies, these actions' central goal is to promote critical-based education aimed at political and economic democratisation, at the transformation of decision-making power and at social change (cf. Lima &Guimarães, 2011, pp. 42-48).

In Portugal, experiential learning has been the foundation for pedagogical orientation in the history of the political implementation of the new adult learning and education strategy launched in 1999 (Barros, 2013a). The rationality of this model in fact proved to be the most widespread background, embraced (as ideal type) in policy documents and study reports supporting the birth of the Portuguese RPL innovative design to be implemented (cf. Melo *et al*, 1998; 2001). As we see it, experience, learning and knowledge are closely interrelated in ALE activities, and the RPL needed to connect the individual facet of the act of learning to the collective facet of what is learned as conceived from this framework. Concerns with solidarity, social conflict and social justice, with environmental degradation and sustainable economic and social development, and with conventional thinking and the common good have been seen as essential. From the national documental political analysis we have carried out the rationale of these documents justify the establishment of adult basic education, RPL dialogic practices and education for democratic citizenship programmes, and the setting up of a broad range of initiatives to promote a civic sense and a critical and thoughtful ability to imagine future scenarios and more sustainable lifestyles. We argue that the conceptual design and political priorities were close to Harris's (1999) radical RPL model, where RPL candidates should be encouraged, by means of critical pedagogies (e.g. conscientisation, naming the world, ideology critique), to be involved, in combination with adult educators' performances, in societal transformation, liberation and redress. This was highlighted in the guidelines of the central national policy document at the time, *Programa S@ber+*, where it was stated that ALE should,

> Consider individuals in the multiplicity of personal and social dimensions of which they are composed to help their ongoing personal development and to secure their full insertion and social participation, and base training on ethical, aesthetic and social values, in particular awareness of ecological belonging, objective judgment, respect for diversity, solidarity.
> (Melo *et al*, 2001, p. 15)

It was interesting to find out as one of the conclusions from our data, presented in next section, that these political priorities embraced in the political foundation documents were not the dominant way of guiding RPL practices and have not been the main ingredient in the Portuguese policy agenda for ALE since then.

The modernisation and state control model

As Lima and Guimarães (2011) say this model values those processes intended to ensure equal opportunities for everyone, especially for those who are less able to get education and training (Desjardins, Milana & Rubenson, 2006). The model stresses the learning priorities connected with the development of abilities that allow the mechanical use of codes for reading and receiving messages (rather than sending them). Under this model learning give adults the ability to decipher literary messages from outside rather than to encrypt their own experience in the written word. From our understanding it is thus a model that focuses on teaching and receiving; it is the *banking education* in Paulo Freire's conceptualisation (Freire, 1970), in which memorising is emphasised and read texts are the main source of dialogue with the learner. As we see it, the main political results of education

practices illustrate the efforts at social control and the reproduction of social inequalities, where questions about existing conceptions of growth and prosper are not posed.

Here, Lima and Guimarães (2011) argue that the most striking conceptual elements are related to reducing the field of adult learning and education practice to formal education and to stressing the importance of targeting vocational training at promoting economic growth. As the authors emphasise, this is why the conception of ALE in this model is largely reduced to the tasks of reading, writing and arithmetic, to learning of an academic, educational hegemonic nature and to school-type vocational training. This amounts to the fragmentation and insularisation of adult education, leading to popular education initiatives (Mayo, 1999) and those prompted by socio-educational associations, promoted by the third sector (and others), remaining at the margins of public policies for this sector (cf. Lima & Guimarães, 2011, pp. 48-56).

The human resources management model

Public policies influenced by this model embrace priorities in which as Lima and Guimarães (2011) argue an essential aspect is the encouragement of employability, competitiveness and economic modernisation. Here, ALE is an instrument for producing human capital and the individual acquires new responsibilities, crucial in the lifelong learning approach. Several authors have argued that in the post welfare model of economic development and forms of production the essential feature is people's skills in managing information and knowledge (Olesen, 2006; Sanz Fernández, 2006). This is where, as Lima and Guimarães (2011) stress, we find education and economics drawing closer in an appeal for greater productivity, competitiveness, flexibility; and it is in this context that an understanding of education (training and learning) as an investment can emerge, with frequent analogies between training and financial capital in the context of a society constantly exposed to risk. In our understanding this model, though aimed at all adults, implies social dualisation. This dualisation is fed, as some other authors have argued, by the demand for training which is influenced by working situations in higher ranking posts (Rasmussen & Rasmussen, 2006). This is made clear since those who have been more successful at formal education are the people who most seek out training as an investment and who, thanks to the current social and economic conditions have the expertise to get jobs. At the other extreme we have people, like those ones of our research study, who are poorly qualified or are qualified for jobs that are disappearing. As we realise from the European and national documental political analysis carried out (Barros, 2013a), for these people, who 'have least', public policies have been implemented that prioritise individuals with the lowest levels of knowledge and skills, and procedures for recognition and validation are pivotal. Here, lifelong learning public funds that support RPL and vocational training are linked to market principles, private management and public choice, with the almost exclusive predominance of preoccupation with the functional adaptation of labour to economistic priorities.

Regarding conceptual elements, Lima and Guimarães (2011) stress that ALE is missing as a benchmark concept whereas continuing vocational training is particularly valued. With the aim of meeting continuing training needs and trying to solve the problems created by the obsolescence of vocational knowledge, for the authors this model stresses the continuing training of young people and adults to acquire skills, to retrain and to be recycled, with the focus on the acquisition of skills. Although competence may be defined in several ways (Andersson & Fejes, 2005), here, following Lima and Guimarães (2011), it is taken to be something that adults should have and viewed as

knowledge acquired by each individual from their experience in different non-formal and informal contexts. Competence took on a new meaning that stresses usefulness. In another words, above all, it has a utility value. It shows that individuals are able to carry out a specific task, to actually do something. In addition, competence here has been understood as measurable ability and knowledge that has yet to be assessed and formally documented (cf. Lima & Guimarães, 2011, pp. 56-64).

Main Results and Discussion: examining sustainability in Portuguese RPL policy

In our field research we found some traces of humanistic and progressive discourses (close to the modernisation and state control model presented before) underpinning the RPL political priorities and practices, with the twin aims of expanding access to education and supporting individual acquisition of certified skills. This may help explain why we often saw conceptual discussions on the equivalence between experiential and formal learning. This equivalence construction was strongly linked with the scholarly representations of practitioners involved in the balance of competences[9], as these testimony shows,

> "when I was at secondary school I had to know things that I didn't like, or completely understand… I mean adults learners here have a duty as well".
> [E(G5)21/2011].

> "If I had learned math at basic school as I learn *math for live* here… then school could have been much more interesting and how knows… maybe I didn't dropout at that time…how knows!…"
> [RO(S16) F/2005]

From this standpoint, and analysing our data, we argue that the political aim of achieving individual advancement means dealing with the failings of learning; basically, it aims to redress or remedy more than to prepare or prevent and thus promotes the validation and certification of basic competences and skills for social inclusion and control. Indeed, from here we do think that Portuguese RPL became trapped in the country's modernisation policy rationale and was largely operating as a mass certification device[10] being disseminated by government representatives as a panacea to solve a under skills landscape (cf. Gomes & Capucha, 2011).

The empirical data of our study research have highlighted here an important contradiction because adult candidates who failed at school needed appropriate pedagogic support to successfully re-contextualise their prior learning into the mainstream language of a national framework of key-competences. But with a mass RPL process at work we observed that the people who benefited most, in the absence of sufficient time to perform differently, were those whose competences was closest to what is formalised in standards.

We could see from our research, particularly in data from the local empirical context studied in 2011, a current emphasis on application and on flexible and practice-based learning programmes. As

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[9] The balance of competences is the skills assessment used in Portuguese RPL practices, with evidence of competences compiled into portfolios.

[10] The national network of centres has grown up from 7 centres (in 2001) to 459 centres (in 2010). During this period 1.316.955 adults' learners have been inscribed in RPL offer and 409.641 have obtained a certification (cf. CNE, 2011).

we interpreted it, this represented a local attempt to develop forms of RPL that were more in accordance with the contemporary socio-economic demands, where the emphasis was on ideas like useful learning, lifelong qualification and education for employability. In our fieldwork data collected in 2011 the adoption of pragmatic measures of the RPL processes was the rule, as this testimony exemplifies,

> "several adults learners are unemployed and they need to be successful in certifying their prior learning... its important to improve their skills at the same time as they adapt to the demands".
> [E(G5)43/2011]

The RPL short term process studied in 2011 thus frequently chose trainability over education, promoted individual responsibility over social responsibility, and disregarded activities in favour of exploring conscientisation about sustainable environments and collective destiny. This performance has been recontextualising the participatory techniques embraced in the RPL national foundation documents, and still possible to be observed in 2005 fieldwork data. The techniques are now more subordinated to collaborative and team work in a risk context and post-crises world.

> "it would be nice to work in a more differentiated way with each learner, and just in small group of adults... [in training sections] but I just have to keep up the rhythm and compass with the others, we have a team work spirit because we all are aware of the risks...".
> [E(G1)8/2011]

We argue that this has thereby instrumentalised and diffused the democratic, emancipatory and autonomous principles that underpinned the original Portuguese design of these processes. In the end, the RPL methodologies and related ALE pedagogical techniques have turned out to be apolitical (not concerned anymore with reading the word and power relations as before). Thus, the main concern observed was not to foster competences like critical thinking, imagining future scenarios and lifestyles, or making decisions in a collaborative way, with others and with nature.

In short, nowadays everyone should have the competences that make them employable, and in this management context the recognition, accreditation and validation of competences of the poorly qualified are essential. The shared view we have observed in 2011 is that the skills that people develop during the course of their life should be utilised mainly to improve humans as resources.

At the same time these ambivalences have been ethnographically observed, we have found that practitioners (in 2005 as well as in 2011) appeared to agree with the idea that knowledge cannot be neutral (reasoning close to the democratic-emancipatory social policy model), but this was put in terms that reinforce the status quo (an educational conceptualisation and rationality closer to the modernisation and state control social policy model). We also saw (in both empirical contexts) a disregard for the idea (seen as romantic) that education could help to change the growing social exclusion that is a feature of the late modernity development pattern, prompting suggestions for 'reversing policy-making options' (Livingstone, 2012). Hermeneutic phenomenology showed us that a more pragmatic feeling prevailed in both contexts of adult educators' daily work; they mostly showed ethical concerns about working with adults' biographical materials, but not political engagement with the radical transformation of today's social injustices or unsustainable lifestyles (Ghirotto, 2012; Barros, 2011; 2013b).

Our analysis of national policy documents shows that the very idea of sustainability, as a core value at the heart of the democratic-emancipatory model for social policies of ALE as well as the general mission of these RPL designed devices by ANEFA's[11] working teams in 1999, has not been consistently observed in mainstream policy-making contexts since then. The data from the two educational contexts studied for this research (with a time dimension angle) concerning the RPL practices showed no significant differences in terms of methodology and adopted pedagogies. The data showed, in accordance with the modernisation and state control model, that candidates' prior learning had occasionally somehow been manipulated to conform to canonical bodies of knowledge, such as when, in portfolios, RPL candidates are encouraged to provide documentary evidence of relevant past learning and reflective narratives which analyse their learning processes, making underlying comparisons with academic modes of thought advancing an instrumental (not critical but simply instructional) use of experiential learning. As one adult learner argues,

"the hardest thing for me was to understand the National Referential of Key-competences… I still don't think I've understood it properly and I'm already finishing this... (laughs) It isn't easy to understand how they translate our lives into all those requirements... well, perhaps with more time, explanations, discussion it would be easier... but there is never enough time for a lot of explanations... so I just do as I'm asked and that's it".
[RO (S16) I/2005]

We also found, in both empirical research contexts (in 2005 and in 2011), discussions that saw the benefits of increased self-esteem as a major result of the RPL process in particular. The data sources confirm that the participatory teaching and learning methods (followed in a similar rationale by these 2005 and 2011 adult educators) succeeded in motivating and empowering adults, especially women, for example, when RPL engaged them in thinking about contexts that are personally relevant to their social role, for instance as mothers (seen as invisible educators). The results allow us to indicate as a major strength of this approach to learning its potential when it involves creating opportunities for debriefing and consolidating ideas and skills through feedback, reflection, and the application of the ideas and skills to new situations. If more time and engagement were available this could be more closely related to education for sustainable futures, as UNESCO urges. As different adult educators have said,

"we see that our adults' self-esteem grows as a result of our work, they become more confident in themselves...".
[RE (C) 6/2005]

"after a candidate's self-esteem has been increased we can more easily work on empowering them to adopt more earth friendly daily behaviours…"
[E(G4)12/2011]

More than discussing ALE's educational contexts conceptually regarding the political and economic challenges derived from a generalised adoption of a sustainable lifestyle, we observed that adult learners and educators try to adapt themselves to the demands and assumptions of the current system and organise more restricted, yet efficient, educational work on sustainability and simple, unique ways of protecting the environment, as this testimony illustrates:

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[11] ANEFA, Agência Nacional de Educação e Formação de Adultos (1999-2002).

"it is very pleasing to note that, at the end of the process, these women, who mostly spend their life looking after the house and the children, have gained a new confidence in themselves and believe that they too can evolve, learn more and help save the planet from home by separating the rubbish, or from their choices as informed consumers who are mindful of the environment…".

[E(G3)5/2011]

Between 2005 and 2011 the most important issue in the Portuguese political scene was recognising prior learning for the purposes of certification of a (notably increasing) unemployed adult population. As we understand it, this rationale of RPL practice had the primary mission of control, even though it enabled a reclassification of individuals when they eventually embarked on formal learning or training courses. As the data show, this has a major political impact on existing power relations: on the whole, they have been preserved and reproduced. Thus, we can see this as being more about legitimating an alternative form of exclusion (albeit not consciously in the educational contexts of practices) than about spreading new opportunities for upward social mobility through ALE.

When, in both contexts studied, practitioners prefer to assign goals that are more modest and faster to achieve to RPL practices, significant traces of the human resources management model could be recognised. This is also true when they talk about the diversity of knowledge and experiences of the candidates, to underline how this causes problems for the operationalisation of experiential learning methodologies. They highlight this as a major setback in their (increasingly insecure) educational working context, where there is no time for pedagogical activities, since it is mostly spent on planning the necessary steps to assure a quick identification of key competences and an appropriate number concerning the required total number (to keep the job in precarious times) of certified adult learners through RPL practices. In both 2005 and 2011, the need for more time was very much stressed by adult educators, especially so that prior learning could be validated and recognised as part of a process that could actually offer ample opportunities for candidates to extend lifelong qualifications.

The data show that, in Portugal, anyone who wants to validate their competences, particularly if they have knowledge that needs to be socially recognised and certified, relies on such competence validation to be considered a "competent adult" (Andersson & Fejes, 2005, p. 601). Competence is seen, by adult educators, as the ability to do something, an ability that is developed as a result of specific, relevant individual experiences. This means knowledge is acquired; it is no longer exclusively produced in the formal education system since it can be learned elsewhere. The assessment of what has been learned shifts to the assessment of the life trajectory, including what they have learned in the past. So experience counts as competence and this is a major strength of the RPL noted by both adult learners and educators, and we think it can be seen as the hard core of RPL within auto-sustainability, as these testimonies shows:

"one of the most interesting outcomes of this process is that we look at our life trajectory in a new way… it's unbelievable how I myself undervalued important things that I never knew that I knew!"

[E(L4)25/2011]

"even though it's a daily challenge for us educators the truth is it is very rewarding to work with the life experience of the people coming to us in this Centre … in fact, I don't know how much I've learned with these adults in the process … therein lies the added value of RPL, in this mutuality of possible learning…".

[E(G2)17/2011]

Even if many European policy discourses have suggested that learning has a broad meaning, the fact is that on the Portuguese agenda of prior learning recognition it was not learning *per se* that was the focus, but the macro-statistical results of the process[12]. Owing to this evaluation and measurement of competences, qualifications became central in Portuguese ALE policies, ALE discourses, ALE agendas and ALE practices in the first ten years of the 21st century. To ensure these mainstream rationales for the validation/accreditation of valid (institutional, marketable and socially valuable) knowledge acquired by people during their lives, particularly outside school, formal rapid assessment processes emerged (Barros, 2012b). We think that, this confined the potential of RPL by creating a short-term programmed public form of ALE provision; which was tentatively financed by the state.

Our research has shown that, from the point of view of educational actors in the field, there were two structural weaknesses in Portugal's new public policies on the adult experiential learning agenda: i) the fragility of the prevailing 'programme rationale' of funding the RPL centres with, nowadays very visible, implications for the sustainability and continuity of adult education's public offer provision; ii) the vulnerable status of professionals working in the national ALE public system (where ALE constructed scenarios have the importance and durability of a 'political campaign rationale'). This has implications for the quality and local achievements of these educational activities. These structural weaknesses have turned out to be particularly significant to the current field of policy studies in ALE.

Final remarks

This article has discussed some results of RPL policy and practices actors' interpretations study. The data discussion allows us to argue that the top-down decisions made on RPL policies have restricted the local potential of RPL as a transformative practice. We found that RPL is sustainable from the inside and has genuine potential to foster the critical empowerment of the adults involved, provide that the educators are granted autonomy and the power to influence the definition of political priorities to be achieved. If power were exercised from the bottom up, these practitioners would choose to focus the action on pedagogy and processes, not on outcomes. From the point of view of adult learners and educators involved in the experiential processes studied, documented by means of an ethno-phenomenological approach, the RPL is sustainable from the inside if the educational policy agenda expands some of the local achievements, for example, the significant new demand and participation of poorly-educated adults in ALE activities and the increase in their self-esteem which, in some cases, enabled them to outline plans to continue their studies.

This analysis was undertaken from within the general framework of a new type of adult education and training strategy and the 'new educational order', originating in Europe in late modernity. The three analytical policy models proposed by Lima and Guimarães (2011) were used to examine the political aims and achievements of sustainability on the RPL agenda as viewed from the point of view of adult learners involved in the experiential learning process. Using this theoretical basis the study revealed the hybridisation between the various educational rationales involved. The ethno-phenomenological approach meant that the analysis could also discuss the meanings of central strains and contradictions discovered empirically. In these scenario educators (both in 2005 and in 2011)

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[12] The New Opportunities Initiative has been present in December 2005. At that time the main objective was to qualify a million of active adults until 2010.

managed the contradictory political priorities for ALE agenda in the most pragmatic way they could in order to keep their jobs. Thus use educational work to increase collective awareness in adults' learners was not observed as a local priority.

Under Portuguese policies on lifelong learning between 1999 and 2011, recognition of prior learning (notwithstanding changes in national boards) has been considered a significant process for extending participation to adult education, while creating a workforce with formally recognised transferable skills. Even though not enough, it was important in the delicate Portuguese educational context where qualification and literacy rates of the adult population still are very weak. However, in many circumstances recognition of prior learning seems mainly designed to recognise that learning happens outside formal education organisations and to offer individuals flexibility to accumulate recognised pieces of learning over their lifetime. With the new opportunities initiative policy (2005-2012) an effort was made to substantially expand the RPL practices, using European social funds and appealing to active adults (employed and unemployed) as the target-group most in need of securing self-qualification. This transferred new responsibilities to the individuals involved: mostly adult learners and adult educators. But as we see it, this does not mean that responsibility has shifted towards a broader alliance with powerless groups and their social interests. Therefore, even if there is a potential for change, neither raising adults' motivation to join adult education initiatives, nor the redistributive and equal opportunity issues concerned, are serious issues for neoliberal policies that focus on individual choice and individual freedom, as this study shows.

Overall, contemporary Portuguese RPL practices seem to be trapped within policy contexts characterised by unquestioned modernist theories of knowledge and experience that favour the existing power relations and increase the dualisation of society. This partly explains why it has been possible to dismantle (since 2012) the RPL system established in the New Opportunities Centres without provoking any serious criticism or public protest. In the context of this article, which looks for some sustainability implications, the main question today seems to be: would it matter if Portuguese RPL as a distinctive adult educational offer disappeared?

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