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MEDIATION COMPETENCES IN ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN PORTUGAL AND FRANCE

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Abstract

Educational Mediation is an emergent field, namely, regarding to the contexts of Adult Education and Training. As the result of the new educational models developed in the field of Adult Education and Training (AET), in Portugal and in France, during the last decade, new professional profiles have emerged: the Mediators of the Courses of Education and Training of Adults (EFA Courses), the Specialists of Diagnosis and Referral (SDR), the RVC Professionals (PRVC) and the Specialists of Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE). One of the dimensions under discussion in this area refers to the competences that these Professionals must have to succeed in the pursuit of their work and they really have had to develop a set of specific skills to deal with the challenges ahead of them in a daily basis. Indeed, the concept of competence in Educational Mediation has been much substantiated, studied and discussed and in this article we will present some of the results of a predominantly qualitative multi-case study carried out in Portugal and France and discuss the data related to those skills and the role of the figures of Mediation in these challenging processes.

Keywords: Educational mediation, competences, adult education and training, mediation profiles, communication skills

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade have been implemented and developed, in Portugal and in other European countries, with relevance to the case of France, new educational systems that seek to enhance, on one hand, the Lifelong Learning and, on the other hand, the recognition of acquired experiences, being examples, in Portugal, the Courses of Education and Training of Adults (EFA Courses) and the process of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) and in France the Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE).

With these structures, new careers and professional profiles emerged and the concept of competence¹ has gained an increasingly high importance, since those Professionals (the EFA Mediators, the Specialists of Diagnosis and Referral (SDR), the RVC Professionals (PRVC) and the Specialists of VAE) have had to develop particular competences related to the specificities of the new models of Education and Training of Adults, in which they were working.

But to what competences are we referring to? According to Milburn (2002) the technical skills are important, but the experiential knowledge and the experiences acquired in the field are essential and Lascoux (2007) states that a good performance is the result of a serious training in human relationships.

In this paper, we will present and discuss certain parts of the multi-case comparative study we are developing in Portugal and France, in order to approach some of these aspects, basing our statements and conclusions on the literature review and on the analyses of the data collected using observation records, autobiographical narratives and semi-directive interviews.

2. Problem Statement

The EFA Courses, the process of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences and the VAE process came to be specific and revolutionary models in today's educational and training panoramas and brought up strength to an emerging field, the Educational Mediation.

The Educational Mediation helps the learners to acquire the skills and tools to increase their autonomy, encouraging reflection and the learning of significant knowledge. This Mediation of facilitation focuses on the process, involves reaction, negotiation and adaptation and comes from the view that knowledge must be built by the students/trainees in natural and

¹ In this paper, the concepts of competences and skills are considered in the same sense and other variations of meaning that can be found in some bibliographic references are not explored.

significant pathways based on their experience and on their relationship with the environment (Gremmo, 2007, pp. 67-68).

The self-training Mediation allows the trainees, therefore, to acquire the tools to build their own knowledge from the relationship with the surrounding environment and, moreover, allows them to evaluate their course of action, being granted, thus, power over their training.

In this sense, being an innovative area, particularly, in the contexts of Education and Training of Adults, we find important to stimulate work and research in the field of Educational Mediation, namely, regarding the study of the profiles of the Professionals related to these contexts and the analysis of their practices and competences. On the other hand, it is essential to work towards their training, once it is a recent and complex activity.

3. Purpose of the Study

With this study, we aim to understand more about the Educational Mediation in the contexts of Education and Training of Adults and explore, in a constructivist way, the roles played by the Professionals that work in the EFA Courses (the EFA Mediators), in the process of RVCC (the Specialists of Diagnosis and Referral (SDR) and the RVC Professionals (PRVC)) and in the process of VAE (the Specialists of VAE), comparing the Portuguese and the French realities regarding these systems and the practices, competences and struggles of these actors.

Broadly, we intend to understand the role played by these agents by analyzing their practice and comparing it with the theoretical principles of Mediation, in order to grasp their potential and shortcomings, difficulties and ways to overcome their problems, through integrated reflection on the improvement of their skills.

In summary, we want, thus, to study the professional profiles that can be found in the contexts of Education and Training of Adults in Portugal and France, to realize their practices, constraints and professional expectations, to encourage reflection on the development of training devices to inspire the exchange of knowledge, to develop/update/improve their skills of Mediation and, consequently, to promote pedagogical innovation to their professional practice.

4. Research Methods

Our research is predominantly qualitative and, as we have seen, it focuses, particularly, on a multi-case study that compares the Portuguese and the French realities concerning their processes of Adult Education and Training, as well as the professional profiles of the figures of Mediation associated with them and their professional skills.

The overall goals of the research are, therefore:

- To foster the study and research on the field of Mediation in the context of Adult Education and Training; and
- To develop systems of pedagogical innovation in this area.

To this end, we selected three cases in Portugal (a SDR and three PRVC from a New Opportunities Centre, an EFA Mediator from a Professional School and an EFA Mediator from a Local Development Association) and three cases in France (a VAE Technician from a University, a VAE Coordinator from an Academic Centre for the Validation of Acquired Experience and a VAE Coordinator² from an Academic Device of Validation of Acquired Experience).

The cases in this study result from a sample by contrast-deepening (Guerra, 2008) i.e., this type of sample is located on the border between single case and multiple case studies, because it is intended to establish a comparison between two contrasting cases that work as a case study (in-depth analysis) and as a typology of multiple cases (p. 47).

What was sought, therefore, was to develop an exploratory study with the purpose to explore and compare, in depth, each case.

In this paper, we intend to question the concept of competence and to present and reflect on the skills that the Professionals participants in the study have or should have for the proper performance of their work in Educational Mediation and Adult Education. To that end, an effort will be made, here, to relate the theoretical concepts of several authors concerning this matter with the analysis of the observation records, autobiographical narratives and semi-directive interviews conducted during the exploratory stage of the research.

5. Findings

The concept of competence has been studied for decades, it has evolved over time (Le Boterf, 2005) and it is unquestionable its importance in the current discourses, especially since the 1970s, when the idea of qualification began to be replaced and the conception of professional performance took place, valuing not only the assigned work, but also the actual work (Le Boterf, 2005; Stroobants, 1993; Tanguy, 1994). Le Boterf (2005, p. 10) emphasizes

² The VAE Coordinators are not part of the analysis in this paper, as they perform different functions from the other Professionals who collaborated in the study, so that their role in the research is related to the framing of the VAE process, which is not our purpose to discuss here.

this evolution, pointing out that "being competent in a work situation in 2000 no longer means the same thing as being competent in 1950 or 1970".

Fleury and Fleury (2001) defined competence as a "word of common sense, to denote a person qualified to do something" (p. 1), which implies the knowledge of a subject. However, a competence is always related to an action (Dias, 2010; Terssac, 1996), so, being competent refers to knowledge in action and involves an aspect of knowing how to be and a know-how (Cruz, 2001).

Terssac (1996) underlines that competence refers to all "that is involved in organized action and all that takes into account the organization of the action"(p. 234) and it is enriched by social and communicational capabilities (Stroobants, 1994).

Thus, the knowledge only become a competence when is used, transferred and integrated, which is always contextualized (Fleury & Fleury, 2001). According to these authors;

the notion of competence appears (...) associated with verbs such as: to know how to act, to mobilize resources, to integrate multiple and complex knowledge, to know how to learn, to learn how to engage, to take responsibilities, to have strategic vision [competence is, accordingly,] a knowing how to act with responsibility and recognition, which implies to mobilize, integrate, transfer knowledge, (...) and resources that add economic value to the organization and social value to the individual. (p. 3)

Competence and work are interlinked areas and, in this sense, the changes in the professional and organizational worlds brought up new meanings to the concept of competence. In fact, the uncertainty and the instability of the professional field brought not only the need for workers to develop new qualification requirements, "but also a new [perspective on the] dimension of the content of their capabilities, focused on understanding the whole process of production, on the integral and universal skills" (Markert, 2002, p. 196). Thus, the Education and, particularly, the Adult Education are now appealing to the development of transferable skills for new and complex situations, i.e., transversal skills.

Thus, according to Dias (2010, p. 74), in educational terms, "the competence emphasizes the power to mobilize resources, expertise or experiential knowledge [and] an approach by skills enhances that students learn by themselves, learning how to learn, building personal knowledge through interaction". The aim, therefore, is that the learners mobilize a set of skills that allow them to solve complex problems by themselves, responding to the changing situations that occur in their daily lives, because, as stated Le Boterf (2005, p. 18), "being competent is increasingly being capable of handling complex and unstable situations",

enhancing the development of critical and emancipatory environments that can transform the society.

This perspective is essential to the success of the work developed by the Professionals on whom this study focuses – the figures of Mediation – once, on one hand, they deal with heterogeneous and complex Adults that come up with new situations every day and, on the other hand, the innovation of the processes of Education and Training of Adults in terms of curriculum and methodologies demands the development of new and integrated skills. In terms of results, firstly, we must emphasize that the research is related to the field of Formative Mediation (Gremmo, 2007; Silva 2008; Silva et al., 2010), which, in the area of Adult Education and Training, is more informal in its scope (Domingos & Freire, 2009). Although the skills we will refer to are mostly associated to the formal field of Mediation, we consider that they make perfect sense in these contexts, once we find here a learning process that involves the presence of a third party. Thus, the authors mentioned in this paper seek to bridge the gap between Formal Mediation, which is based mainly on the model of conflict resolution and Formative and Transformative Mediation (Torremorell, 2008) that is found in the Education and Training of Adults.

According to Milburn (2002), the Mediation process enhances dialogue and allows the development of skills that strengthen relationships, in order to solve current conflicts and prevent later ones. In this sense, a proper practice of Mediation involves the development of communication skills that evoke dialogue and understanding between individuals - in a non-directive logic - and we found those communication competences among the Professionals that participated in our study, when they sought that their Adults reflected on their experiences by questioning them about what they knew and, thereby, facilitating a process of self-discovery and reflective praxis.

I always try to show the positive and negative side of things and if they had had a different intervention with people, they probably would have had another result, despite what they report (Extract of the Interview with Mediator 2)

The Mediator is concerned, as we may see, with the reflection of the Trainees regarding their behaviors and attitudes, so that they can analyze the situations they face from another perspective, which implies that the Mediators should embrace an active posture, guiding the discussion and creating a climate of trust and empathy (Lascoux, 2007; Milburn, 2002; Muller, 2008) and this implies active listening, appreciation of feelings, acceptance of others without judgment and demonstration of interest.

In fact, the Professionals who participated in this research, sought to understand what was the subjective state of the Adults, showed interest in them and tried to anticipate their

reactions by analyzing their verbal and nonverbal expressions. They also motivated and gave them positive reinforcement, when they showed attitudes of interest, responsibility and reflection, as can be observed in the following transcripts:

Professional: You just used the simple rule of three; do you see that you know how to use it?

Professional: I see that mathematics will not be a problem for you (PRVC 1, Observation Record, Session 1)

Reinforce, positively, the experiences of the Adults, using an emphatic, motivating, dynamic speech (e.g.: *So, you said that mathematics was not in your life and you have already given me so many examples ... After all, you know more Maths than you though...*) (PRVC 1, Observation Record, Session 3)

...encourages students, questioning, challenging and motivating them for continuing learning and training: You like to learn, we can see it (PRVC 3, Observation Record, Session 5)

The prevalence of a motivational behavior is essential in these contexts, where the Adults have few qualifications and often show low self-esteem and self-reliance. In fact, "the congratulation or the recognition of the other is an act of knowing how to live, which the mediator in his pedagogical dynamic shall forward to the parties" (Lascoux, 2007, p. 157). In this sense, the establishment of a horizontal relationship based on dialogue, reflection and clarification of doubts is very important.

The Professionals demonstrated skills of interpersonal relationships and the ability to create empathy with the Adults, by stimulating them to reflect independently and by establishing a climate of dialogue with them, as we can see in the following quotes:

[The Professional] states that it is a process that involves hard work but they are all fighting for the same purpose, certification and mentions that "your success is my success" (PRVC 1, Observation Record, Session 1)

Which is found in the empathy created with the Adults and in the ease with which she began to conduct the session (SDR, Observation Record, Session 1)

Here, the PRVC 1 created empathy, when she said that the Adult's success is her success, thus, calling for co-responsibility and commitment from all of them, so that the results could be positive and constructive. On the other hand, the SDR tried to create the conditions necessary for everyone to feel comfortable and satisfied with her intervention. According to

Milburn (2002, pp. 122-123), this required techniques such as hermeneutics, interpretation of feelings, situations and words and maieutic, which is related to the formulation of propositions that are fair to the person in question.

The need to build trust was also present in the affirmation of the PRVC 3, when she stated that:

If people do not feel minimally comfortable with the person, who will be their tutor, their mediator, they will never be able to write whatever it is (Extract from the Interview with PRVC 3)

And the EFA Mediators, accordingly, sought also to establish a close relationship with their Adults, which was essential in their work:

...because we are asked for help for any situation, even in private, personal and we try to help and they can manage to overcome such situations happening (Extract from the Interview with Mediator 1)

When problems arise they come to me, we talk and I try to help them. Sometimes, there are some (...) because, for example, the wife is unemployed and they come asking for help, to see if I can get a job for the wife (laughs) (...) they, I think this is positive, whenever there is something, they seek me. If there wasn't an approximation, say, of empathy, they would avoid coming to talk to me about the issues and they don't, they always look for this approach (Extracts from the Interview with Mediator 2)

However, this same closeness should be viewed with caution or otherwise it may lead to an excess of confidence or, eventually, less impartiality, which is a core competence of the Mediation work and refers to the equal treatment of all parties involved.

Milburn (2002, pp. 41-42) stated that the Mediator is an interpreter, because "he allows the parties to have a respectful understanding of their motivations and their passions". Thus, he/she facilitates decision-making and the expression of motivations and he/she should be creative and stimulate the Mediation sessions using this creativity by fostering the creation of interactive solutions to solve problem situations that arise.

Lascoux (2007) pointed out that the skills of a Mediator must be worked out, so the training is very important. This author indicated that the Mediator must have active listening and patience skills, as well as a long experience at the level of human relationships.

Milburn's study (2002) indicated that, in some cases, it is necessary to show some judgment and this happens in these contexts, for example, when the Professionals need to draw attention to the fact that the Adults are not children, but they have responsibilities and duties and, therefore, it becomes necessary to appeal to their conscience. The VAE Specialist denoted

the difficulties that some Adults have in committing themselves to rules and deadlines, so she stated that it becomes necessary, sometimes, to call them to reason:

In general, they have great difficulties in respecting and reading the instructions. There are, sometimes, delays into the process.

I am often obliged to remind them that we are in a relationship between Adults and I'm not their Teacher. I also make them understand that they work for themselves and not for me
(Extracts from the Interview with Specialist of VAE)

During the exploratory study, we realized that, sometimes, the Mediators had to use their "position of authority" to control the Adults, when they had episodes of conflict and discussion. This is a controversial aspect and even a paradoxical one in terms of the philosophy of Mediation, but it proved to be essential or, otherwise, the Trainees would not have been able to overcome their problems. Are we facing a specificity of these contexts regarding the process of Mediation, since the Trainees often fail to develop sufficient autonomy to carry out the tasks without some imposition? Or, on the other hand, does this behavior go against the basic principles of Mediation and the basic skills of a Mediator, even if it is in a particular context?

Communication skills are essential to a successful performance in this field. However, the Professionals did not always reveal good communication management:

Aggressive tone of voice with some Adults, when they showed difficulties in answering the questions as she wanted (PRVC 2, Observation Record, Session 2)

Raise the voice, when an Adult confronts her with questions about issues that she has already explained (PRVC 2, Observation Record, Session 3)

The Professional makes expressions of boredom: staring at the floor, looking out of the window or arranging her clothes, while one or another Adult asks her questions (PRVC 3, Observation Record, Session 5)

She appeared to be impatient, when the Trainees did not respond immediately, pulling on her bracelet, hair, staring at the floor or the windows (Mediator 1, Observation Record, Session 1)

... facial expression of boredom, looking at them very seriously (Mediator 1, Observation Record, Session 3)

Despite the existence of situations like the ones described, we may say that they were not the rule, so that its occurrence would have been due to conditions of emotional stress, fatigue, excessive work load and/or responsibilities. However, the Professionals should learn

how to deal with their frustrations, because control is another emotional skill of a Mediator, crucial to the success of these processes of education and training.

6. Conclusions

Lopes, Cunha, and Serrano (2010) indicated that the competences that contribute to the success of Mediation are "impartiality, credibility, training, kindness, firmness, conciliatory attitude, understanding, expression of satisfaction, control of hostile statements between the parties, creating a climate of confidence, ability to suggest (...) the clarification of important issues" (pp. 920-921).

The Mediator should, therefore, regarding a transformative practice, establish an enabling environment for the parties to clarify their feelings, their goals, their expectations, so that the participants make decisions for themselves. In fact, the figures of Mediation in the field of Education and Training of Adults, as has been seen, facilitate communication, guide the Adults, since they provide the basis for their reflection about their skills and knowledge. In this process, the Trainees must develop new competences by themselves, from the resources given to them, in order to become autonomous and conscious.

Thus, self-reflection, self-consciousness and the denial of value judgments are essential for the practice of transformative Mediation. The Mediator must be optimistic regarding the skills and motivations of the parties and of their ability to transform themselves and grow as relational beings. Therefore, in this context, the work of the mediator is to create the conditions for managing the conversation and help the participants to chart their itinerary, their own solution to the conflict. This is an invitation to dialogue, understanding and active listening, to the reflections and discussions with our own experience and that of others. The paths are, in themselves, a reflection of what they consider that can intertwine, of the bridges that may have, of what is similar and what is different, what is beyond acceptable or possible (Basto, 2008, p. 17).

To sum up, it can be stated that the general framework and the control of the relationship and of the exchanges between the parties form the essential element of competence in mediation. They represent the single point of support of mediators, which do not have any prerogative, any power connected to their status (Milburn, 2002, p. 24).

In conclusion, the study results point out neutrality, impartiality, communication and interpersonal relationships, relational balance, empathy, motivational behavior, creation of bonds of trust and of a harmonious atmosphere as the essential competences for the Mediation work in the contexts of Education and Training of Adults.

However, it was also noticed that not all Professionals dealt with situations the same way, which reflected the existence of quite diversified professional profiles in the field of Mediation, which was also related with the personal characteristics of the figures of Mediation. This aspect increases the complexity of the Mediation process, especially, in the field of Education and Training of Adults.

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