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11. LITERACY PRACTICES IN ADULT LEARNING BIOGRAPHIES

Possibilities and Constraints

LITERACY CHALLENGES

The answer to the social and economic challenges is assumed to be literacy (or its lack). Consequently, the developed countries are deeply concerned with the problem and all governments, particularly those of the OECD area, have created public policies in relation to this challenge. In recent decades, these concerns have given rise to several and varied monitoring devices, initiatives and programmes for (mainly) reading development, thus putting a major stress on education. UNESCO (2006, p. 6), for instance, assumes that the challenge of literacy can only be met by raising the quality of primary and secondary education and intensifying programmes explicitly oriented towards youth and adult literacy. In Portugal, this concern has also been echoed in public reforms that aimed at “the increasing of schooling, extending the hours in pre-schools, reducing early drop out, increasing secondary education completion rates, as well as the overall improvement of the access to higher education” (Data Angel Policy Research Incorporated, 2009, p. 65).

One of the most representative cases of such initiatives was the programme New Opportunities (NO), and its process of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competencies (RVCC), which was targeted at adults over the age 18, who had not concluded the current ninth grade of (compulsory) pre-secondary schooling. This New Opportunities programme aimed at the promotion of the inclusion of adults in formal education (OECD, 2008, p. 136). Although there are no explicit references to literacy in the normative documents of the NO and RVCC, one may say that literacy is indeed one of their goals, as it assumes – in the case of RVCC – a particular status: the end and the means of learning. In fact, the entire certification process is mediated by language practices that are considered essential for self-reflection about the personal experience of individuals; namely, life stories, interviews, portfolios, among others. All of which are written products to serve simultaneously, as evidence and as development of the skills acquired throughout life. Ultimately, as in previous policy measures, the educational goal of the process is:

to ensure all adults living in Portugal [...] an easy access to specific learning modalities, that may enable them to learn to read and write, to achieve a

basic literacy level and to get an equivalent degree to the current compulsory education. (Melo et al., 1998, p. 16)

This hypothesis about the role of literacy in the process is also confirmed in the implementation processes which, as it has been observed, institute literacy as a priority area of action (Castro & Laranjeira, 2009; Gomes, 2006).

In the sense that they allow the study of the ways certain groups relate with writing and with knowledge (Charlot, 2000), these ‘new opportunities’ for learning are ideal situations for understanding how participation in these processes acts in the transformation of the literate identities of people and how, in their life trajectories, it reflects opportunities and constraints impacting on the ways they use, access and value texts (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007).

“Challenging representations” about the position in the community of adults without or with scarce schooling, which tend sometimes to be considered in a “mistaken view” (Freire, 1980, p. 73), as “socially excluded” (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011, p. 350) and suffering from the disease of “illiteracy” (Lahire, 1999), the goals of this text are, first of all, to contribute with empirical data to the deeper comprehension of the individual life story of adults that voluntarily or compulsorily had to go back to school. Secondly, we intend to identify and characterise some social and personal factors that tend to promote or inhibit access to the written world, to knowledge and to lifelong learning after the completion of the RVCC process.

From the combination of data gathered for two different studies (Cunha, 2012 and another one, still in progress), we can characterise the learning trajectories and the literacy narratives of four adults that completed the Basic Level of the RVCC process. Besides the specificities of the reading and writing practices of the adults, particularly regarding the whats, whys and wherefores and under what circumstances they read and write, ultimately we are expecting to understand why they will keep, or not, reading and writing throughout their lives.

PATHS TO LITERACY: PERSONAL NEEDS AND SOCIAL IMPOSITION

The data regarding the four adults that we will discuss are related, as it has been said, to two different studies: a case study of two adults with distinct motivational profiles (Study 1) and one larger study (Study 2), which involved 30 adults and which, in addition to interviews and documentary analysis, used other methodological procedures; namely, reading and writing tasks and questionnaires.

In Study 2 in order to understand how the learning process contributed to other kinds of involvement with texts in the various fields of life including more formal situations, the adults were interviewed before starting the RVCC process and then again six months after concluding their certification. As in Study 1 in which the data were collected at the end of the process, the underlying goal of the interviews was the need to build a solid understanding of the factors involved in the ways adults

continue – or not – to participate in formal learning events and the extent they kept (or not) being involved in more socially recognised literacy practices.

The four adults ('Pedro', 42 years old, and 'Inês', 30, from the Study 1 and 'Jorge', 58, and 'Marta', 49 years, from the Study 2 are from the district of Braga in Portugal and they completed the RVCC for the Basic Skills Level Certification in 2012. The criteria for the constitution of this particular sample were the representativeness of gender and school experience of the adults. These adults represented a population that, living with the phenomenon of unemployment, had at the start of the RVCC process, low academic qualifications. They also represented different paths through education and literacy. Marta and Inês, voluntarily enrolled in the process to complete the third cycle of Basic Education, while Pedro and Jorge "were forced" to enrol, due to the imposition of the State and within a legislative framework for employment support, as they keep stressing during their interviews:

I did not sign up voluntarily, I was forced. I had no chance, I was forced. (...) for me it will not change anything at all (...) This (...) only goes to make me waste time walking back and forth, nothing else. (Jorge)

I did not go there with many expectations. (...) No, because, as far as the employing companies, they do not see this as an improvement (...) and they knew that I was in that place, so that the Portuguese statistics would not increase, so as not to have so much school dropout. (Pedro)

Although the educational background of these two adults had not been enough for them to complete the nine years of compulsory education, Jorge (with five years of pre-secondary schooling) and Pedro (with seven), throughout their lives had held relevant professional positions. Before becoming unemployed, Jorge was a successful commercial agent in the area of sales and finance for several years and Pedro was a talented sales manager in a family food trade company:

Until a few years ago, I really played choosing the jobs I wanted. That's why now forcing me to do the ninth grade, the ninth grade ... For God's sake! (...) Note that I already worked in the Post Office; I was a civil employee (...), in the express mail (...). I also worked with finances (...) no one without the 12th grade could get the job, but I did. (Jorge)

I can say what I wanted, it was a job that would fulfil me, because, as I already mentioned, it was a family business. (Pedro)

By that reason both believed that their attendance at such a process would not bring them any added value; namely, the development of their reading and writing skills. They were certain that during their professional trajectories they had had the opportunity to acquire and develop literacy practices similar to those valued by the school system, such as writing reports or formal letters. On the other hand, they did not believe that the school diploma could bring them more advantages for a successful job quest. Jorge had a professional past that he used to reinforce this

argument. For these two men, then, the RVCC process was – from the beginning – a kind of downgrading and disregard for their literate identities (Dionísio, Castro, & Arqueiro, 2013) forged through engagement in multiple and diversified life contexts.

As for the women, Marta and Inês, their views on the importance of the RVCC both for their learning and their professional careers were totally different. With very short school trajectories – Marta only completed the fourth grade and Inês the sixth of compulsory education – due to severe money difficulties of their families, the possibility of going back to school to get a certificate appeared as a dream that was going to be true, a kind of late “divine justice:”

I hope that this dream that I idealised in my head becomes true (...). That’s what I really expect. (Marta)

I returned to study, not only to obtain more schooling, but to learn a little more and in this way to have studies equivalent to compulsory education. (Inês)

Marta and Inês expected that – with attendance of the RVCC and the certificate of Basic Education – they could, more easily, be more active professionally again and, with that, have better life conditions. Until starting the certification process these two women had been mainly seamstresses in textile factories. Because of these professional roles, unlike the two men, they did not have opportunities for the development of reading and writing skills, as well as being involved in more culturally valid reading and writing practices. According to these women they should have had these practices to really be *insiders* of the dominant groups (Gee, 1996) and maybe to be considered as holders of references shared by the literate world and, consequently, to feel authorised to say: ‘I make part of it’. Sharing such views, Marta and Inês had a “devalued vision of themselves” (Charlot, 2000; Freire, 1987), thus aspiring to become literate persons only after the obtaining of their certificates:

You know, miss, I wanted to know more. I wanted to know more! (...) I hope, when I finish the process, I hope to get a job, to work with which I am learning in the course and later to be able to write on the computer. To be faster in everything. Given this current modern stuff, to be able to follow these technologies. Because, for us, me for instance, it is everything with the ball pen, right? For now. Whereas, if I can, then I will be able to do things by myself. Do you understand? (Marta)

Therefore, and although they read frequently, for instance, magazines and marketing brochures and even write not only SMS but also poetry, this did not seem enough to them to be taken as “literate persons”.

LITERACY IDENTITIES: OUTSIDERS AND INSIDERS

A social perspective of literacy sees the use of texts as human actions of a social nature. In this sense, reading and writing includes everything that people do with

texts in their diverse modes and formats and in the different social events in which they engage daily. Thus, taking this into consideration – in such events – the way one uses texts varies, due to the multiplicity of purposes of reading and writing. Consequently, literacy does not have then the same features in all life domains. In fact, in order to acquire, learn and exhibit the social languages and identities which are proper of those domains (Gee, 1996), people need to be socialised in several spheres according to their norms and ideologies. Then, it is with participation in several events of literacy that the shaping of the literate identity occurs.

Looking at what happened to these four adults after having participated in the RVCC, a formal learning context, which was characterised by specialised reading and writing practices that were unfamiliar mainly to Marta and Inês, it is possible to conclude, in fact, that there have been more or less significant changes in the ways they viewed and engaged with texts and – in the cases of the two women – also in the ways they thought about their social identity. Besides the frequent reading and writing practices that already had a presence in the lives of these adults, after the RVCC new literacy practices became part of their daily life, mainly as a cause of their participation in new social domains.

In the case of Marta, whose reading and writing practices, before the certification process, were mainly of a private nature; namely, the reading of popular and love magazines, as well as poetry and diary writing, for instance, they were a means of filling spare time. After the RVCC, besides the reinforcement of these same practices, others of a more formal nature gained an important space in her life. Due to her new religion, she started reading quite often the Bible and other religious books. She also began to take on the duty of writing about what she read in order to share her learning with others of the religious group:

I often go to the Bible and I read books, but related to the Bible. (...) I write summaries when I have the Bible study group. (Marta)

Although attendance at the certification process had not played a significant role in the decision to belong to a new social group, the certificate and the literacy skills she developed gave her confidence to participate more actively within it and for the community. It is worth noting that the literacy events of this new domain were in several aspects very similar to those Marta learned during the RVCC, as she stresses:

We look for texts in the Bible, then we have books which have Bible texts, with note calls, they have those explanations and after we go to the Bible to confirm that what is said is really correct and things like this (...) Because they then ask me questions and I have to know how to answer them without going to see the book, without copying. (Marta)

As for Inês, her confidence and autonomy regarding literacy were also positively affected after certification. She made clear that reading and writing activities became much more present in her daily life; namely, those valued by the educational context, such as literary reading:

Indeed, since we talked the other day I managed to read a book to the end (...) *Burnt Alive*. It's a story... a little bit ... even tragic. I do not know if you know the story. (Inês)

If the textual worlds of Marta and Inês became larger, the same cannot be said in the cases of Jorge and Pedro. For these two men, the compulsory 'schooling' did not bring the same changes. In fact, taking into account the past of Jorge, as text user, the literacy practices that characterised his daily life – for instance, book, journal and newspaper reading or the writing of formal letters and texts about archaeological artefacts – maintained the same space that they already had in his life, except for the difference that some of those reading and writing practices became associated with the use of the computer and the internet:

I use [the computer] to do things such ... things like [written texts on topics that interest me]. Look, now I use Skype to talk to my daughter, who went to London (...) And I use that and I also use the internet to do, to search things and whatever more is necessary. (Jorge)

Mainly through the newspapers, Internet, I still continue ... one or other book that now comes with the newspapers (Pedro)

To a certain extent, then, the RVCC had the merit of introducing Jorge to new literacy technologies – a fact that he does not seem to value. In fact, both for Jorge and for Pedro, their reading and writing skills, that they have always perceived as specialised and sophisticated, perfectly serve their professional, social and personal goals:

I do not know any other person that reads as well as I do, I mean, well, on a daily basis, I read very well. I also write very well (...) I fully understand what is written, everything I read'. (Jorge)

For Pedro and Jorge the time spent on the RVCC was a waste and without any consequence for them:

To be honest, I did not learn anything new. (Pedro)

That (the training) was useless! I always said and felt that, since the beginning (...) didn't affect me at all for good or for bad. It only made me waste my time and to spend fuel. (Jorge)

This negative impact was felt from the beginning, when these men were treated almost as outsiders, and in a very inhuman way put outside the social system (Freire, 1980), because they did not possess a certificate. In the case of Jorge it is possible to think that his disbelief about the RVCC was reinforced when he had to declare to the RVCC professional that he had no certificate:

– I do not have certificate of competence, I said. "So what now? Do I put zero here?" she said with arrogance (...). I did not even reply. (Jorge)

Although, as Freire (1980) says, these persons without certificates “are not at the margins ... they are not outside ... consequently the solution to their problem is not to force them to become inner beings” (pp. 74–75). Jorge and Pedro, because once they had been full citizens and suddenly they were made redundant, felt the process as an aggression. In the case of Jorge this aggression was exacerbated by the discourse of the RVCC professional. In another position were the women that did not perceive themselves, as someone who “knows” or as someone that possessed some kind of knowledge. They did not believe in themselves, thereby embodying the devalued vision they made of their literacy identities (Freire, 1987, p. 50).

LEARNING AND LITERACY LIVES: INTERRUPTION AND REDISCOVERY

The data discussed until now showed us a clear variation in the ways the men and women regarded learning and literacy before and after the RVCC process. Since Jorge and Pedro once had been successful insiders of the literate culture, had engaged daily with literacy practices that were – to a certain extent – similar to the “dominant/school like” ones, their engagement in literacy or more specifically in learning that they foresaw after the RVCC was not expected to have changed greatly or almost certainly it was not likely to continue. What seems to have really happened was an improvement in the competencies that they already possessed; namely, of those that were more standardised and formal. On the other hand, although they were not able to identify changes, it is impossible to deny the change, because it can be said that there is always:

a sense in which ‘doing’ anything, engaging in any social practice, always means ‘learning’ in the broad sense. Each time someone engages in a practice, whether that practice is brand new to them or whether they have done it many times before, there is some ‘learning’ going on, because each time you engage in a practice, you reinforce your expertise in it, and also have the possibility to change it slightly. (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007, p. 25)

The opposite situation is that of Marta and Inês who after completing the RVCC have been seen participating with self confidence in literacy events that demand the features of the dominant and legitimate reading and writing practices. Special life circumstances dictated this: Marta, because she became involved with a religious group, and Inês, because she had recently become a mother and, according to her, to be a good mother was synonymous with being able to carry out school-certified literacy practices. In the case of the women, it is indeed the overvaluation of the school-like reading and writing practices associated with the positive experience that the RVCC represented for them that made Marta and Inês develop willingness to give continuity to their learning trajectories by keep being involved in other education situations:

Look, listen to this, I even signed up for an animation course ... for seniors. But not here, you know, it was in another place. And for children, for children. Something like this. (Marta)

In a near future, I would like to complete the ninth grade, learn how to use the computer in order to conclude the twelfth grade. (Inês)

With respect to Jore and Pedro, the fact that the RVCC had been seen by them as a discrediting of their literacy identities, as well as an hindrance to their lives, which had been interrupted in order to learn what they already knew but which they could not prove, led to not wanting to participate any more in formal learning events:

[About his possible engagement with other training] No way! (...) One thing I like to do it is to make a good use of my time. And that was lost time (...) A waste of time. (Jorge)

However, the break with the RVCC processes does not necessarily lead to a total discontinuity in the learning career of these adults. Taking into consideration these adults literacy biographies, it is almost certain that their lifelong learning careers certainly will continue, albeit informally, in other contexts of their lives.

Looking at the life trajectories of these adults, we see how literacy lives can, of course, follow different paths. Such paths crossing, at some point, formal learning contexts, such as the RVCC, may or may not have continuity, due to factors such as life circumstances and personal future prospects, as well as personal views towards the value of the written culture in the different social spheres in which these persons operate. The perception that each one has of himself/herself, while text users and knowledge personas, is also invaluable for these continuities and discontinuities. The social roles that one has in the community may also determine the future learning path.

Indeed, for the men of these studies, who did not have in their future projects the return to school and whose personal and professional involvement with textual worlds was notable and sufficient to allow continuous learning for personal, social and institutional purposes, the RVCC process was clearly understood, as a threat to their literate identities, an interruption or even a regression in their already sophisticated ways of using the written word.

The opposite was found in the biographies of the women. Because they were guided by the dream of being able to continue their educational background, and because they were aware of their scarce and undervalued way of engaging with texts, the attendance at the RVCC represented both one opportunity to have a better life and the beginning of learning careers that will certainly go far, albeit with distinct contours, in the everyday life of each one.

As we have seen, it is almost certain that attendance at these processes, although for disparate reasons and under different circumstances, helped to add to the identity kits of these four adults features and values that the literate communities attach to reading and writing.

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