PART 2

THE AGE OF METRICS AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF POLICY AND PRACTICE IN ADULT EDUCATION

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5. THE ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL BODIES IN LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE POLITICS OF MEASUREMENT

The Promise and Pitfalls of Outcomes-Based Assessment into Recognition of Prior Learning System in Portugal

INTRODUCTION

In a new era of Lifelong learning (LLL) that has been characterized by an increasing use of metrics, and an analysis of the influential role of transnational bodies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Union (EU), in promoting this in adult learning and education (ALE) is necessary. The restructuring of the regulatory political power of the state, with a corresponding shift in the relationship between the market, the civil society and the state marks a major discontinuity in ALE. I want to make the case that this is a political issue rather than a merely a technical issue. Who decides what should be measured, how and why, are questions of power and help to delimit and define what is deemed possible. And who benefits from these changes? In this chapter I explore these issues through the case of indicators and outcomes-based assessment recently introduced in the Portuguese policies and practices of recognition of prior learning (RPL).

THE ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL BODIES IN LIFELONG LEARNING

An international governmental organization may be defined as “a formal, continuous structure established by agreement between members (...) of two or more sovereign states with the aim of pursuing the common interest of the membership” (Archer, 2001, p. 33). These organizations flourished after the Second World War to become influential actors in the establishment of international and national guidelines, programmes, evaluations, audits and standards in various aspects of social life. In the last quarter of the 20th century, International Organisations (IOs) became increasingly central actors in shaping education policy. Some of these have taken a humanistic approach, such as UNESCO, others a more individualized and economy-centred perspective such as the EU, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank.

UNESCO has been a key IO mainly contributing to the establishment of an international research field, first based on adult education (AE) and nowadays focused on adult learning and education (ALE). UNESCO's International Conferences on Adult Education, known as the CONFINTEA, and UNESCO official documents and recommendations have been prominent in constructing the field in international settings (Ireland, 2011; UNESCO, 1976, 2016). As concepts are not neutral devices, these changes in terminology in this field, and what this discloses about power and policy, has been one of my abiding research interest (Barros, 2011a).

The move from 'adult education' to 'adult learning and education' in LLL policy marks a paradigmatic shift and is one of the most deeply political processes that have occurred in recent times on this field (Barros, 2012). In this context, the promotion of the lifelong learning paradigm is especially linked to the OECD and the EU. Both IOs produced widely disseminated policy documents, such as the OECD report published in 1973, *Recurrent education – a strategy for lifelong learning*, and the *Memorandum for Lifelong Learning*, published by the Commission of European Communities (CEC) in 2000.

In the *Memorandum*, the concept of lifelong learning is understood as: "any learning activity with an objective, undertaken on a continuous basis and aimed at improving knowledge, skills and competences" (CEC, 2000, p. 3). The distinction is clearly made between two dimensions associated with the concept: one of them is expressed in the term 'lifelong', where "the emphasis is laid on time: learning during a lifetime, continuously or periodically" (2000, p. 3); and a second dimension is expressed in the term 'lifewide' in all areas of life, which "draws attention to the dissemination of learning, which can take place in all aspects of our lives (...), during our leisure time and in our continuing social and professional life" (2000, p. 3).

The EU is probably the most influential IO in making the concept of lifelong learning dominant in today's transnational policies about ALE, which can be traced back to the European year of lifelong learning in 1996 (Kopecký, 2014). However, it is the OECD which is the most relevant IO in how outputs are being assessed in many areas of LLL practices. A crucial part of this has been the development of international surveys in the 1990s (i) the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS); and (ii) the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which means nation states increasingly use comparative measurements and take rankings into account in setting national targets and priorities in ALE.

These IOs are influential and powerful agents and should be considered, together with the *Education Strategy 2020* of the World Bank, as responsible for ushering in a new lifelong learning era. Competitive globalization is leading states to seek competitive advantage through the improvement of competencies of working adults, including through the recognition of prior learning (RPL). As a result, several international recommendations and national policy instruments for the governance of RPL have emerged with the explicit purpose of increasing 'effectiveness' and improving levels of national qualifications.

THE RISE OF THE POLITICS OF MEASUREMENT AND
GOVERNMENT BY INDICATORS

Central to the reform of the welfare state is a redefinition of the means and purposes of government, as Le Galès puts it “the contemporary question of measurement and quantification is part of the agenda of state restructuring” (2016, p. 12). Essentially, states have changed from being tasked with ensuring the production and maintenance of key public goods. Nowadays, the new model of social regulation reflects the transition from solid modernity to a more liquid form of social life (Bauman, 2000). In this process the redefined state adopts a strategy of finding consensus between pluralistic interests, and creates a new set of decentralized mechanisms. This is linked to new forms of political organization in society, where networks and flows from heterogeneous sources and different kinds of organizations predominate and combine to bring local, national and global factors onto the political agenda in new combinations (de Sousa Santos, 1995). The state, today, serves a meta-regulatory function (de Sousa Santos & Jenson, 2000) through its role in the selection, co-ordination, prioritization and control of non-state actors. Through this process the state has significantly changed both the scope and the form of its own social regulatory power and a panoply of innovative devices, instruments and indicators has emerged. Additionally, the EU has, since the 2000 Lisbon Agenda, induced a new rationality on how to govern (Nedergaard, 2007) by means of New Public Management (Hood, 1991).

This political turn, presented as a technical enterprise meant to be neutral, is based on the development and deployment of a vast array of public policy instruments intended to improve public performance in the name of effectiveness, efficiency and a decrease on public sector expenditure (Jackson, 2011). This can be understood as mechanisms of political discipline, allowing the consolidation of a regulatory state and new forms of domination (Le Galés, 2016). As noted in the introduction this is directly related with the questions of who decides what should be measured, how and why.

Therefore, a subtext of the politics of measurement and its focus on targets and outcomes is a major concern about control (Radin, 2006). The EU controls member states’ performances and governs controlling performances of institutions and individuals. However, the intended consequences of measurements (as part of an explicit and implicit agenda) coexist with unintended undesirable consequences (Lewis, 2015).

THE GLOBAL PROMISE OF OUTCOMES-BASED ASSESSMENT IN
LIFELONG LEARNING

In the supranational scene, an active role has been performed by EU¹ in the production of lifelong learning policy documents which include precise recommendations and reporting schedules for member states. Three policy documents are of particular

importance in this regard: (i) EU's 2006 Parliament and Council *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*; (ii) the Council's 2012 *Recommendation on The Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning*; and (iii) EU's 2018 *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*. Together those widely disseminated documents aim to make the European 'space' the most competitive area in the world.

The documents explicitly promote competitiveness, employability, equity, social inclusion and active citizenship. The tool used to monitor the achievement of these goals is the updated 2018 version *European Reference Framework*, which was first published in 2006. Through this, the member states are invited to create a system that allow each citizen to develop a "wide range of key competences to adapt flexibly to a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world" (2006, p. 13). At the same time each state must "report on progress through the biennial progress reports on the *Education and Training 2010 Work Programme*" (2006, p. 12). In the EU's 2018 Recommendation the ability to monitor progress of members' states is reiterated:

The Commission proposes to develop a scoreboard to monitor the development of key competences and to provide information on the measures implemented to support competence development. It intends to develop a proposal for future European benchmarks in competence development with regard to the next cycle of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. (2018, p. 12)

The development of competence frameworks that help define learning outcomes and form a basis for assessment and validation practices is much valued (2018, p. 8), supported by the results of international surveys, where validation will:

Enable individuals to have their competences recognised and obtain full or, where applicable, partial qualifications. It can build on the existing arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning as well as the European Qualification Framework, which provides a common reference framework to compare levels of qualifications, indicating the competences required to achieve them. In addition, assessment plays an important role in structuring learning processes and in guidance, helping people to improve their competences also with regard to changing requirements on the labour market. (2018, p. 15)

Those 2006 and 2018 recommendations together with the *Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning* (2012) created the policy framework for national states to operate nowadays in the context of the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training* (ET2020) and the Commission Communication on a *New Skills Agenda for Europe*, COM (2016) 381.

Therefore, the role of EU in developing the new lifelong learning era ties national states in different ways according to the dynamics operating on the global, national and local scenes. This next section aims to highlight a set of problems and

contradictory agendas that recently became apparent in ALE in Portugal where there has been an attempt to combine recommendations of two main IOs with differentiated visions and power capabilities, as well as the advent of government by indicators and outputs in the field of recognition of prior learning national policies.

OUTCOMES-BASED ASSESSMENT – REFLECTIONS ON THE PORTUGUESE RPL CASE

Considering that Portugal has a history as an imperial power but has become a semi-peripheral state (Wallerstein, 2004), its political relationship with the core and the peripheral world areas has been multifaceted and implied a constant renegotiation of (colonial and postcolonial) power, legitimacy and sovereignty in the global arena (de Sousa Santos, 1993). Indeed, shifts in the global economic and political power relations have frequently disrupted the governing agenda and the emergence of counterhegemonic forces on the national scene, which resulted in the hybrid semi-welfare and semi-neoliberal Portuguese state of today. Particularly since its entry into the EU, in 1986, the impacts of Europeanization processes have been highly visible in diverse spheres of Portuguese public policy.

This is clearly reflected in Portuguese ALE where transnational bodies had a marked impact on the field after 1996, when it became subject to pluriscalar governance, particularly through European co-financing mechanisms (Barros, 2013a). After the advent of democracy in 1974 up to the 1990s ALE was mainly ‘second chance’ and/or recurrent education. A policy of ALE for the 21st century was announced, inspired by the 1976 UNESCO recommendation for ALE and based on recognition of experience. The government’s presence in the fifth CONFITEA in 1997, and the Hamburg’s Agenda for the future, influenced the emergence of a new political program² in 1999. Adult education and training has been understood, since then, as:

Ongoing initiatives in the field of education and lifelong learning, intended to raise the educational and qualification levels of the adult population and the promoting of personal development, active citizenship and employability. (Melo et al., 2001, p. 11)

In this context, the year 2000 and 2001 were marked, in Portugal, by the National Agency for Adult Education and Training (ANEFA³), which introduced new institutions and educational processes fundamental for the establishment and implementation of the Portuguese national system of RPL (Barros, 2013b). This RPL system originated a network of centres of recognition, validation and certification of competences (Centres RVCC) to meet the educational needs of the adult population, revealed by an extensive literacy study (Benavente et al., 1995). However, that original humanistic vision informed by UNESCO, has given rise to a narrower focus, influenced by the EU, in which RPL was understood as a structuring element of the state’s post-Fordist economic modernization.

This national RPL system agenda was characterized by a strategic vision that tried to address the lack of recognition of competencies within the adult population. With this scope RPL was considered a means towards achieving social justice and an opportunity for vulnerable adults to have recognized and certified skills and knowledge that have been acquired over the course of their lives in various contexts. Indeed, RPL practices introduced in Portugal between 2001 and 2005, focused the process on the adult specificities and on his/her life experience, using tutorial practices with educators employing different methodologies (such as competences assessment, life narratives, portfolio building, and others), valuing self (re)cognition and drawing on this to initiate new educational projects with transformative potential. In this period, even with some tensions, I would argue, the RPL process mainly served the project of personal and social emancipation for the most disadvantaged citizens (Barros, 2013c).

The model adopted in Portugal for RPL process presupposed three fundamental axes of performance, which were sequentially as follows: the recognition of key competences; the axis of validation; and the axis of certification. Thus, the recognition of key competences was understood as the personal identification process of previously acquired competences, “which seeks to provide to the adult occasions for reflection and assessment of his/her life experience, leading to the auto and hetero recognition of their competences and promoting the construction of significant personal and professional projects” (ANEFA, 2002, p. 15). This axis of performance was one of the most important for activating a transformation in the perceptions of the adults about themselves and about the world; the next axis of performance was the validation of key competences leading to the granting of official status for individual competences. Procedurally the validation of competences was made, by an oral presentation of the portfolio to a jury of validation. It was conceived, then, as a “formal public act undertaken by an entity duly accredited to award certification with school equivalence” (ANEFA, 2002, p. 15). Finally, the last of the structuring axis concerned the certification⁴ of key competences. This certificate had an equal legal value when compared with the regular school certificate. In short, the main purpose of Portuguese RPL policy and practices during this period was to promote the visibility of informal and experiential learning, assigning it with a use value, in educational, social and professional spheres.

This was how Portuguese national system of RPL worked until the end of 2005, when a new policy for ALE and RPL appeared, called *Program of the New Opportunities Initiative – INO* (2006–2012), through which the new governance of ALE was introduced, representing a milestone for RPL practices. This marks a decisive moment in the rise of the politics of measurement and government by indicators in the Portuguese ALE and RPL, and in this the policies developed by the EU, since the Lisbon agenda, were crucial.

The *European Area of Education and Training*, launched another phase in the process of Europeanization of the educational and training policies (Barros & Belando-Montoro, 2013), visible in the Portuguese case through the INO Program.

I argue that the INO Program, and subsequent political events, can be interpreted as an effect of this particular supranational agenda (Barros, 2011b, 2018). The strategy of the INO Program was based on two fundamental pillars, on the one hand, to give new opportunities to young people through the increase of techno-professional courses; and, on the other hand, to provide new opportunities to adults by increasing assets of ALE and RPL process. Significant targets were announced in December 2005 to be achieved by 2010, to certify about 1,000,000 adults (650,000 via RPL and 350,000 through other forms of ALE). These unprecedented targets, in the Portuguese context, had a dual purpose: (i) to expand the democratization of access to ALE, through a territorial increase of the network of Centres offering ALE and RPL practices; and, at the same time, (ii) to create more effectiveness and efficiency in the ALE and RPL systems, against a set of criteria that educators must achieve to ensure financing and keep their jobs. The aim was that people would obtain higher certification rates in a shorter time.

In this context, several studies have warned that these processes seemingly transformed a complex educational process of ALE and RPL into a simplistic administrative one (Rodrigues & Nóvoa, 2005). Indeed, a new type of 'remedial' rationality associated with ALE and RPL emerged into the political public discourse since then. Other studies have counselled that educational actors need to remain alert and critical to prevent ALE and RPL becoming just outputs, and so neglecting the personal and social emancipation projects of citizens, in general, and of the disadvantaged, in particular (Barros, 2014).

A fact, much celebrated, was that through these new technologies of government, and according to data provided by INO, the 'efficiency' of ALE, particularly of RPL system, has been improved rapidly. The total number of adult certificates awarded between 2001 to 2005 was 59,040 (44,253 via RPL process and 14,787 via other ALE course) and this number increased between the years 2006 and 2007, to a total of 83,970 (76,922 via RPL process and 7,048 via other ALE course). The success was measured by the large number of centres and candidates, in process and already certified. Thus, ALE and RPL acquired a lot of public visibility, totally unheard in the context of its national history, obtained through marketing campaigns acclaiming the achievements of the INO Program. However, the other side of this story though was the high pressure put on educators to achieve targets. Serious dilemmas emerged regarding the non-measurable aspects of RPL process as well.

New problems and paradoxes had emerged, from the rapid mass production of RPL processes, for RPL centres and educators, as well as for individuals. Adult educators have changed the way they work to avoid the consequences of not achieving targets, and time consuming aspects of ALE often became neglected (with a loss of educational quality); the adults who obtained the certificates faced a subsequent problem that there has been a devaluation of school certificates obtained via RPL. One of the most significant pitfalls of 'governance by numbers', has been the replacement of the aspiration for greater social justice, through RPL, by a neoliberal idea of individual competitiveness, where adults are expected to be responsible and

self-accountable for their 'employability'. However, as more certified competences do not necessarily correspond to a greater availability of jobs for unemployed adults, the question of who wins and loses with the rise of government by indicators becomes key.

The effects on the RPL system shows that, the significant questions about the new policy indicators are not technical but political. From a social justice perspective the RPL system, under the politics of measurements and government by indicators, almost became a confirmation mechanism of inequalities by distributing to the least powerful in society certificates which have been devalued due to the scale and rapidity of their production. The outcomes assessment has implied a significant reshaping of the educators' performances and roles, as they have no access to the creation, decision and control of the measurements system. In the Portuguese case, the rise of measurements was used as a tool to maintain centralized control of ALE and RPL system while decentralizing responsibility. In this context, the adult educator's fragile position, without a firmly established professional status, effectively prevents resistance. Additionally, by focusing responsibility on them legitimated the argument that any closure of an INO Centre was not a political circumstance but a technical one related to an underperformance in outcomes-based assessment.

The restructured Portuguese state used the INO Program as a political expedient to adapt national ALE to supranational requirements under the new policy paradigm for statistics, in which International Surveys have been giving a remarkable contribution.

The instrumentalization of educational policy through compulsory targets and outputs, has resulted in a co-optation of educational work into technical and administrative work narrowing the previously open focus of RPL and diminishing the attention to emancipatory values. With the subsequent advent of austerity policies the short-term centrally driven targets, with concerns about public sector expenditure, definitively won at the expenses of long-term educational objectives. As a result of the global economic and financial crisis, the Portuguese state was severely monitored according to a new set of criteria and goals. Between 2011 and 2015, just a residual network of ALE centres remained as Centres for the Qualification and the Professional Education (CQEP) operated in schools without financing. Under a political action justified by a public discourse of crisis and austerity, with policy instruments of external legitimacy, adult education in Portugal, during that period, disappeared from the political agenda without public resistance. In a sense just this single fact showed, through the field of ALE, how devices for maintaining social order succeeded in neutralizing counterforces, by centralizing control while decentralizing responsibility.

FINAL REMARKS

Regulatory power of states continues to mark public policies, but its main role now implies coordination of different kind of interests from actors spread in a pluriscalar

way. Different national states have thus different capabilities for conducting the global structured agenda for public policies. In this context, IOs became increased influential entities, producing comparative measurements and evaluations, and should be considered together with national bodies in analyses of the dynamics of power and possibilities in lifelong learning era. These are the mechanisms of a political turn in Europe, in which the restructuring of states serves to consolidate an increased regulatory state with new forms of subnational domination, reflecting the increasing power of IOs such as the EU, with new mechanisms of political discipline for states and new forms of national domination.

Therefore, the rise of the politics of measurement in ALE comes inscribed in an agenda that represents a promise of making the European space the most competitive area in the world. However, tensions and contractions have emerged in national policies and practices that express important pitfalls of outcomes-based assessment into ALE. This chapter has highlighted a set of problems and conflicting agendas in the sphere of ALE and RPL in Portugal. If the national agenda for evaluation and assessment on this field, until 2005, was based on a formative rationality and was mostly concerned with social justice for the most disadvantaged citizens in accordance with UNESCO's vision and recommendations; after 2006 evaluation and assessment on this field came to be based on a summative rationality, mostly concerned with obtaining a higher certification rate of low qualified working adults in a shorter time. Indeed, the advent of government by indicators and outputs-based assessment in the field of RPL national policies was used to enact an accelerated state post-Fordist economic modernization, under the auspices of the EU agenda.

NOTES

- ¹ Together with other powerful global actors as: OECD, P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Skills), World Economic Forum, etc.
- ² *Action Programme's knowing +: Program for the development and expansion of adult education and training, 1999–2006.*
- ³ The role of ANEFA was fundamental in supporting extended partnerships increment with the third sector. It has had however a short existence: created in September 1999 was closed in September 2002.
- ⁴ Until 2006 the RPL process could provide certificates only for basic level (4 years 1^o cycle; 6 years 2^o cycle; or 9 years 3^o cycle). In 2007, the RLP has been expanded as a certification for a secondary level (12 years).

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