

Effects of adult education in the development of psychological empowerment

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Abstract. Taking into account that the adult low-qualified population is at risk amid the ‘so called’ knowledge societies and communities, given their vulnerability to exclusion by means of their lack of accreditation and qualifications, the concept of psychological empowerment demands special attention. Despite the generalized usage of the concept of empowerment, with special relevance in the domain of adult education and its critical perspectives, it is still an ill-defined construct which requires for rigorous and valid research in order to clearly understand its complexity, and consequently use it at the service of adult education politics, providers and beneficiaries.

Literature has been underscoring that the adults’ participation in education has positive effects:

- in specific domains of psychological development (promotion of self-esteem and self-value; redefinition of personal, career and qualification projects);
- in activating mechanisms and strategies of personal and professional control (in searching for jobs, or education options);
- in the recognition of the increased qualifications in labour contexts (by the companies), leading to professional development...

But writings on the specific concept of empowerment are rare. This paper aims to present some particular findings of a broader longitudinal research within a PhD project, which general objective was to analyze the relationship between the prescribed goals of adult education and its effective results, based on a specific construct of psychological empowerment in a Portuguese context, from the adult learners’ point of view, but also including other agents and stakeholders of adult education. The study undertook a mixed methodology, using quantitative (self-report questionnaires which were specifically developed for this population) and qualitative (interviews and focus groups) methodologies.

This manuscript will focus on two issues:

- the longitudinal changes in the perception of psychological empowerment of low-qualified adults enrolled in adult education devices and
- the predictors of psychological empowerment outcomes.

The final discussion will attempt to leave some practical implications of the results of this study, related to: the development of sound measures to capture psychological empowerment, the effects of adult education in the development of psychological empowerment of low-qualified populations, and the relationship between training climate and psychological empowerment.

Finally, it will be given space to a brief analysis of the current situation of adult education in Portugal, which has been formally inactive since the end of the year 2012, presently being totally reformed in terms of goals, methodologies, contexts, stakeholders and pedagogical teams.

Keywords: Low-qualified adults, psychological empowerment, longitudinal changes and predictors of change