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Recognition and validation of prior learning as a strategy to open access to lifelong learning for all

My research works are mostly about vocational training policies and measures analysed under the angle of quality and equity. It is a comparative approach between different regions in France but also other European countries. I am also interested in the stakes and effects of the implementation of certain vocational training and validation of prior learning measures, analysed in terms of inter-subjective recognition of the construction of identity and access to active citizenship.

Throughout this paper I will present the issue (problematic) and some results from two researches done recently: the first one in four regions of southern Europe, the second one in two regions of France.

1. The point of view of those who do not participate in lifelong learning.

Within the frame of a research done in different regions of southern Europe, I conducted a first series of interviews of people left on the side of vocational training measures. These people are presently working, unemployed or retired and do not have or at least do not remember to have participated to vocational training during their working life. Sixty-four people were interviewed in four regions of southern Europe: Catalonia (Spain), occidental Greece, the Aosta Valley (Italy) and the Languedoc-Roussillon (France), that is to say an average of sixteen people per region. They belonged to all ages (more than eighteen). Those over forty-five years old and women were over represented in comparison to the overall population for they correspond to the categories that benefit least from vocational training. Following semi-directive interviews they were asked around ten questions concerning their studies (schools and teachers they had known), vocational training (what they thought about it and the reasons why they had not taken part of it), their pastimes, social and associative activities, their informal learning linked to experiences, their feeling of belonging to different communities (regional, national, European) and other factors that contributed to their identity.

I will only present here a part of the results from this first series of interviews, limiting myself to two themes: school records and informal learning or from experience.

The first idea which is widely shared is perhaps induced by the situation of the interview (questions asked by researchers or students which represent themselves the educational world, see Bourdieu, 1993, p. 1389). It is the idea of utility and of the need of education and training in a world that changes and in particular in front of a professional world increasingly demanding in terms of skills required as well as increasingly developing. To understand this world and to adapt to it, studies are perceived as essential (Wacquant, 1993, p. 285).

However as soon as we ask these people what they think about school, teachings and educational institutions they have attended, two reproaches are often made to the educational system and to those who represent it. On the one hand, there is the feeling that educational institutions and teachers are too far from the professional world, that teachings have nothing to do with reality and prepares students badly to confront demands from the working environment. The radical separation between school and the professional world is certainly claimed by lots of teachers in the name of what they consider to be their mission, as well as of general knowledge values and disinterest. It is an explicit refusal to assure a function of preparation to work, to professionalize teaching for this would be, according to them, to subjugate to utility demands and to economical pressure. Yet, it is lived as a maladjustment and malfunctioning by most people interviewed because of the consequences when arriving into the working environment.

The second reproach made to school and teachers is the often felt impression of inflexibility, not to say the authoritarianism and oppressiveness of the educational system. Teachers are described as not very understanding, unable to adapt their teachings to students or at least to some of them, having a level of expectation that is disproportional to what students can give and finally causing failure to lots of them. The ambivalence or paradoxical aspect of the confrontation between the educational system and working classes can also be seen here: the way to a better future which seemed to be opening closes as soon as it is perceived, reinforcing guiltiness or at least the regret not to have caught the opportunity offered.

Those who have not benefited from vocational training have same idea about it as they do about school. They acknowledge its usefulness but recall the different reasons why they have stayed aside: lack of time or information but specially the impression that the training was not made for them, that they would not succeed it. If school has taught them anything it is that they were not made for it. For lots of them, school has greatly contributed to interiorise failure, to build an identity, a depreciated self image (at least in the educational field, in what concerns learning within an educational or formal frame). In spite of the discourse about democratisation and equal opportunity, the educational system carries on

with and reinforces the process of social categorization link to cultural heritage and to the effects of stigmatization connected to ethnic origin, neighbourhood or rural/urban area of residence and to all the classifying factors.

Nonetheless, the best and more interesting answers are those concerning informal learning and learning from experience. All the interviewed people said that they have learned different things all along their personal and professional experience.

The richness of answers surprised some interviewers. Nevertheless we could ask ourselves about this surprise: is it not the sign of an underlying attitude that consists to underestimate informal learning, to consider only formal organised learning, to believe that those who do not participate to training do not learn anything at all or learn very little?

This research forced us to go over our representation of non participant. We have learned to better differentiate the notion of non participant from that of non learner and to criticize the latter. In fact, those who do not participate to formal teaching are not necessarily non learners.

What we retain from this research is then, that we must change our perspective and adopt a new larger conception of learning or lifelong learning. Within this new perspective we should ask ourselves: what do we learn and how do we learn it in a society in constant change, in which exchange, means of communication and information processing have been quite developed and accelerated, in an increasingly global and competitive economy, in an environment increasingly uncertain, often lived as threatening (polluted) and insecure. What is certain is that having to take place in this world, to adapt to it, to live in it, to work in it, eventually to act as a citizen to try to make it better, at least locally, could constitute an extremely reach means of training, a non-stop opportunity to learn. Nonetheless, it is important to specify for whom and under which conditions they become effective.

2. Validation of prior learning.

First I will recall the context of this research: on the one hand the legal and institutional side of the validation of prior learning texts and on the other hand long term socio-economic changes within which measures have to be apply.

The context of this research:

The context is firstly legal and institutional: it concerns the legal evolution of the recognition and validation of prior learning in France and of which I will recall the stages. After 1985 adults who wanted to go back studying could validate their prior experience and be authorised to register to university without having the required diploma. This procedure of validation of prior learning has been applied unequally according to institutions and subjects. Human and social sciences, especially educational sciences have often made access to the university possible through validation of prior learning (to adults coming from teaching, training or social work) to both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

From 1992, validation of prior professional learning has not only allowed access to university in order to get a professional diploma but also the possibility to be exempted from some exams. The condition was to have the board of examiners think these adults had acquired the knowledge and skills equivalent to those validated by exams through their professional experience.

Finally, the application of the January 2002 law concerning validation of prior experience marked a new stage concerning the right of validation of prior learning. It is now possible to ask for the validation of a full diploma and the whole experience is taken into account (professional, voluntary work or other).

The progressive application, although still unequal, of prior texts and especially the new opportunities offered by the 1992 law have carried out an increase of demands of validation of prior learning which has still increased these last months. I think this phenomenon reveals a long term tendency in which it should be replaced: the increase of educational and qualification demands which is linked to long term economical and cultural factors.

On the one hand, the required level of most of today's job offers has significantly risen. This is because of the evolution of techniques, work organization and deep transformations concerning the features of products and services in the market today. Moreover, the possibility to get supervision jobs or to evolve is often linked to the possession of diplomas and certificates. This is especially the case in France.

On the other hand, the lengthening of studies and the development of training activities have marked the last thirty years, which reveal a progression in the demand of education and training.

Both, employer's demand of more qualification and increase of educational and training demand, link between them, constitute two main aspects of the "knowledge society".

Object and problematic of my research about validation of prior learning.

This research project starts from an empirical statement: the January 2002 law and its application decrees, which enlarges the right of validation of prior learning, leads to a strong recognition of knowledge and skills from experience and to an increasing training entry demand, whether they are propose by professional schools or universities. These texts establish a new way of access to qualification and diplomas, which in return acts on the existing ways: the measures and networks of training.

Procedures and practices have been set on to answer to these demands and to apply the texts. However the implementation of the 1985 texts (for university) and the 1992 texts have shown difficulties and resistance. This has only been analysed partially even though there is research describing it and even trying to evaluate the procedures and practices. Otherwise, there is still inequality of access to training. Its mains factors are well known but the real policy proposals capable to reduce it have been rare and are far from efficiency. Can the development of validation of prior learning contribute to it?

The present implantation of validation of prior learning makes it appropriate to analyse the effects on qualification and training demands, on strategies, on the path and obstacles met by those who take the risk. The effects will be without doubt first limited and progressive but the stakes are legally too important for workers (bigger opening and equity in the access to qualification and the possibilities of personal evolution). Secondly they suppose a modification on the French training system as on the attribution of diplomas and finally there is the weight of experience knowledge and taught knowledge.

This paper starts from a set of questions and hypothesis about the effects of the implementation of the validation of prior learning on the vocational training demand and on the access to qualification in the studied activity area. We distinguish three big effects categories corresponding to three sections of this research: whether it is about training demand and qualifying and professional demands from individuals (first section), about employment management and employer's career and finally about the conception of vocational training offer. This paper will only treat the first section of the project: the one concerning the effects of validation of prior learning on training demand and access to qualification.

Validation of prior learning should widen access to vocational training and qualification since registration will be easier and courses shorter, especially for workers and unemployed with few or no diplomas at all and who will benefit from validation of prior learning. An easier access to vocational training and qualification could lead to a reduction of inequalities in this domain. Nevertheless, the quantitative development of training demand will not automatically bring about an improvement in equity in this domain. In fact, just as in school, standardisation in the access to studies did not translate into real democratization. There are still strong inequalities depending on social origin, success in studies, type of institution frequented and nature of diplomas obtained. Likewise, the development of vocational training after the beginning of the 1970s did not keep its “second chance” promises. It is still marked by important inequalities: it has specially advantaged very qualified workers from big companies with important differences depending on the sectors of activities.

How does validation of prior learning come to interfere with mechanisms of inequality of access to training reproduction? Can it question the logic, to which extend and under which conditions? Can a detailed analysis of features of those who ask for validation of prior learning, of their strategies and paths, as well as their failures and refusal of validation, help understand certain factors of reduction and reproduction of these inequalities?

The observation of the implanted measures and of the effects produced will allow to start answering questions. This will be completed by deepened interviews of the different people concerned (demanders and beneficiaries, guides and counsellors, vocational training organisms, employers, human resources and people in charge of training...) in order to explore the factors and mechanisms in cause. Among these: how will employees seize this new opportunity, consisting in the transformation of acquired skills in working situations into recognised qualification? Will they see the potential to build a new professional trajectory? Transforming their skills into qualification will suppose a new type of requirement: to go from the ability to do within a situation, to formulate and place knowledge and acquired skills according to a frame of reference. Will this requirement be an obstacle difficult to get over for some, especially if we consider the existence of tacit skills? More than a demand of training does, building up a validation of prior learning file implies work on oneself, on their activity and skills and sends the responsibility of professional evolution back to the person. Which type of employees will be capable of this thought and engagement? Will inequalities due to school and qualification already acquired, to the size and type of company, to sex and age play in the same way that they do to access vocational training? Which support and guidance measures will allow reducing the effects? My studies start giving some answers to these questions.

In order to reduce the scope of information to collect and analyse I have chosen, firstly, to limit the field of research to one sector of activity: that of special education. The composition of my team, our prior work and our partnership with the regional institute of social work gave us at the same time an easy access to information and a good knowledge of the context and of the actors present.

Nonetheless, the objective is to also to test a methodology and a hypothesis which could later be apply to other fields confronted to other approaches in order to progressively constitute a new research domain. This project is in fact integrated to a middle term research programme. Its following stages consist on the one hand to broaden research to other social, educational and health work. On the other hand it will follow during five years the training journey and professional trajectory of a sample of people who have benefit from validation of prior learning.

Coming back to the more limited object of this paper, we had given ourselves the objectives of observing, listening and understanding what happens and how it happens from the concerned people's point of view. That means that our approach is mainly understanding and clinical.

In what concerns to seekers of validation of prior learning, what is at stake is firstly work recognition (Y. Schwartz, 1997, C. Dejours 2000) but also the need (or demand) of recognition), for which T. Todorov (1995) has shown evidence of a founding dimension of the self and of identity. I even think that we should make a further step towards the works of philosophers and talk about "the fight for recognition" to cite the book of Axel Honneth (2000). Based on the philosophical works of Aristotle and Hegel, as well as on the works of G. H. Mead, he has developed a thought around this notion. He has also developed the stages of inter-subjective recognition through which the subject goes. He has shown its role in the construction of self confidence (emotional recognition), self respect (legal recognition of people's rights) and self love (community's recognition of capacities and qualities around shared values like a successful professional activity).

Finally it is important to mention the last book of Paul Ricoeur, who recently died: "All the way to recognition" and specially the last chapter of the second study which is about the capacities and social practices. I will also cite the chapter of the third study in which he discusses the theory of Axel Honneth. He asks himself if "demand of emotional, legal and

social recognition, by its militant and conflictive style, does not resolve itself in an indefinite demand". He also talks about "insatiable search and miserable conscience".

In what concerns to myself I will criticize the theory of Axel Honneth in the sense that it does not talk about a dimension that seems fundamental in the same way the three types of recognition do or the three types of contempt or refusal of recognition which are associate to it. This is, the recognition aimed at the learner which is shown or not in the educational relations and which bears their capacity to learn, to develop knowledge and skills in learning situations. This type of recognition allows developing cognitive assurance (or insecurity), confidence in self capacity to learn or on the contrary the fear (see the conviction) not be able to, when it concerns learners that have interiorize deny of this capacity through teachers that have too often told them this. I think, it is then important to add a column to the table summarising the inter-subjective recognition models proposed by Honneth, in order to take into account this dimension and this stake of educational situation (see table down).

As a consequence, and in a way this is my main hypothesis, I think that the validation of prior learning demander seeks to restore or reinforce this capacity (and this dignity) of the learner. It also concerns social respect linked to the recognition of a professional competence and legal recognition linked to the exercise of rights in the sense that validation of prior learning has entered working rights, without forgetting the emotional dimension underlying all interaction in which recognition and identity are at stake.

This research helps us think about professional socialisation and the construction or evolution of professional identity as an underlying set of a more global socialising and individuation process (Habermas, 1993) in all its dimensions: emotional, cognitive, professional and citizenship. It gives us a new reading grid that allows us to understand the existential issues and the meaning that the ones interested attribute to it.

In conclusion, what lessons can we draw from the first results of this research in terms of strategies for education and learning, in favour of active citizenship in the work domains, of social life and integration to the community, especially for people threaten by the risk of social exclusion?

It is important to keep in mind that a lot of those people need to restore their confidence in their capacity to learn. This lack of confidence and feeling of incapability are the main cause of their often reserved attitude concerning training, which some qualify as lack of appetite or motivation to be trained. To assert the need for each person to be trained all life long is

then not sufficient. This order to be trained could even, in certain cases, contribute to worsen the process of exclusion instead of contributing to reduce it. In fact this is for some groups a sort of paradox: it prescribes an action they are unable to accomplish and make them responsible of their announced failure. The notion of "capability", defined by A. Sen should be mentioned here and the limits of a purely liberal approach, in terms of the market, clearly appear. For those who really need to benefit from it effectively, the existence of a training offer is not sufficient, nor is its incitation.

The solutions that will allow getting out of this devaluing and social exclusion spiral are without a doubt in the measures that consist to propose socially useful activities, in which the person will start to restore their self esteem thanks to guidance and the positive eye of others on the production of this activity. Informal learning will also be acquired on this occasion and if this learning is recognised and validated, confidence in their capacity to learn will progressively be restored. The conditions to access active citizenship are positive self image and found dignity. Their absence can only lead to standing back, to marginalisation and even to destructive behaviour whether against oneself or others.

Associations organise working sites or insertion initiatives and insertion group actions in order to fight against these risks. Results are often positive. These actions suppose giving enough time and the right frame. The authorities should supply the means to pursue and develop these types of projects if they consider that there is there a decisive possibility for social cohesion in the coming years.

Relationship sphere	“Primary” emotional relationships	Pedagogical relationships	Legal and moral relationships	Social relationships in a community	Professional relationships
Recognition mode	-attention -listening -affection	positive consideration of the learner	respect of the person	social esteem	professional esteem
Personal dimension at stake	emotional	-intellectual capacities -cognitive development	-moral responsibility -dignity linked to rights and obligations	-capacities -social competences	professional competence
Relation to oneself	self confidence	confidence in their capacity to learn	-self respect -dignity -citizenship	self esteem	-self esteem -confidence in their working capacities
Form of ignorance or contempt	indifference mistreatment	denial of capacity to learn	-rights loss -exclusion	-humiliation -offence -social contempt	professional loss of prestige
Form of threatened identity	physical and psychological integrity	intellectual dignity (of learner)	dignity and integrity of the person and of the citizen	-dignity -social integrity	-dignity -professional integrity
Subject's dimension	psycho-emotional subject	-cognitive subject -learner	-moral subject -citizen's rights subject	-social subject -member of a community	subject with a professional identity
Form of transgression or of disintegration	-hate -aggression -violence against their close ones	-refusal -school phobia -incivilities -violence	-immorality -deviancy -criminality	-incivility -marginality -addition to a deviant group	-loss of motivation -rejection of work -parallel economy -traffics