

## **Psychological empowerment as a predictor of quality in training:**

### **A glance at the Portuguese context**

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The empowerment theory suggested by Zimmerman and colleagues, particularly the psychological empowerment construct, shows enough consistency with the AET model to consider that it might contribute to the management of quality in training.

These reports also state the urge for better, more inclusive and more reliable measures in assessing quality in training. Contributions of the empowerment theory to this matter are discussed, attempting to analyse and operationalize it in this specific domain.

**Key-words:** Empowerment, psychological empowerment, adult education and training, assessment, quality in training.

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## **Psychological Empowerment as a predictor of quality in training:**

### **A glance at the Portuguese context**

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This paper analyses the model of Adult Education and Training (AET) in Portugal, taking under consideration the two available reports on this recent domain, which reveal that empowerment is a prescriptive goal. However, this construct continues to be ill defined.

The empowerment theory suggested by Zimmerman and colleagues, particularly the psychological empowerment construct, shows enough consistency with the AET model to consider that it might contribute to the management of quality in training.

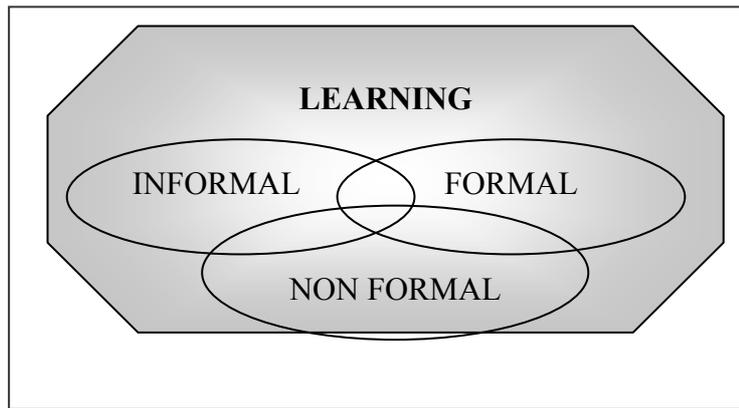
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#### **The Adult Education and Training model and practice in Portugal**

European societies have come to realise the importance of lifelong learning as a nuclear issue on the social and economical development, as Viviane Reding states: «*Making lifelong learning a reality for all lies at the heart of the Lisbon strategy for making Europe a prosperous and rewarding place to live and work in the 21st century world.*» (CEDEFOP, 2003). Important political documents also recognise the growing importance of qualifications and competencies in the actual developing contexts: the UNESCO report (co-ordinated by Jacques Delors<sup>1</sup>) refers to the issues of lifelong learning, learning societies, articulation between initial education and continuing education. The Lifelong Learning Memorandum (European Commission, 2000<sup>2</sup>), on the other hand, states that Lifelong Learning should consider the following dimensions:

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<sup>1</sup> In Canelas, 2002.



Adult Education and Training (AET), based on the larger lifelong learning model, is, however, a very recent model in Portugal, which aims to organise interventions that *«focus on social justice and wish to promote equal opportunities and participative citizenship»*. (Canelas, 2002: 11).

The AET model is based on very specific and original characteristics: first and foremost, its philosophical and epistemological arguments rely on the notion of competencies (general, vocational and key-competencies). Based on this, the essential documents that regulate training are the Key-Competencies Framework, which leads to a process of Recognition and Validation of Prior Learning (**RVPL**) and the Vocational Training framework, both articulated in the same process, which represents a "qualitative jump" in the domain of Education and Training. The Portuguese AET model looks at training processes *“in a perspective of construction of new social relations, interactive and empowering, able to provide those adults the opportunity to build their own personal and professional projects.”* (*ibid.*: 12).

Training begins with an initial process of gathering and exploration of self-reports and evidences that result from learning in various contexts, where the participant recognises and validates his/her lifelong learning, followed by individual training, constructed and reconstructed around the participant’s needs, always based in negotiations in which every actor has a role. The specific structure of these courses is shown in **Table 1**:

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

Training options	Recognition and Validation of non-formal learning	General Training		Vocational Training	Total (hours)
		Learning with Autonomy	Key-Competencies Areas		
Basic 1	25h e 40h	40h	100h - 400h	220h - 360h	385h – 840h
Basic 2	25h e 40h	40h	100h - 400h	220h - 360h	385h – 840h
Basic 1+2	25h e 40h	40h	100h - 800h	220h - 360h	385h – 1240h
Basic 3	25h e 40h	40h	100h - 800h	940h - 1200h	1105h – 2080h
Basic 2+3	25h e 40h	40h	100h - 1200h	940h – 1200h	1105h – 2480h

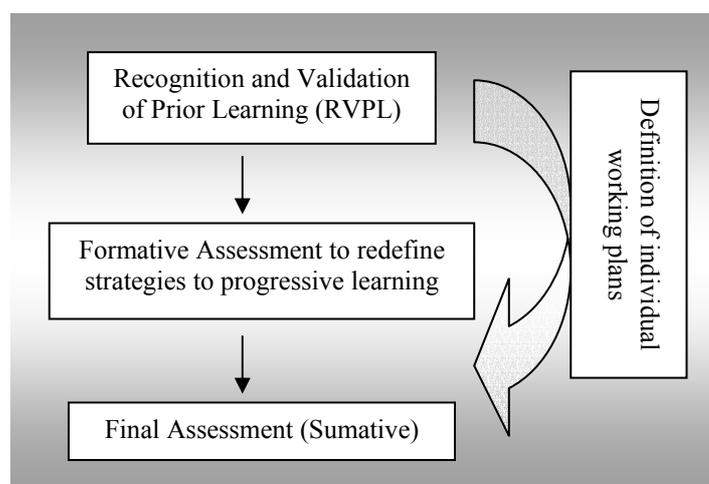
**LIFE THEMES**

Transversal area in the curriculum which themes, selected from the interaction between local and global worlds, inform and organise the approach in the different key-competencies areas.

Table 1 - Structure of AET courses<sup>3</sup>

In this structure, one of the most important characteristic is the fact that the pedagogical team is extremely responsible for the good development of training. Inside the team, there is a prominent figure, the mediator, who's present from the very beginning till the end of the training process, accompanying trainees and trainers, articulating entities and community organisations and giving feed-back to the promoting entities.

Another specificity of AET is related to the process of assessment in AET courses, as referred in **Figure 2**.



<sup>3</sup> Cf. Canelas (2002: 19). **Basic 1** refers to the 4th year of academic certification/ Level I of vocational qualification; **Basic 2** to the 6th year of academic certification/Level II of vocational qualification; **Basic 3** to the 9th year of academic certification/Level II of vocational qualification.

One final aspect of AET is the particular importance given to the community in which the training takes place - whether building learning relationships, trading know-how and experience with relevant organisations in the community, or the impact of having more qualified, participative and critical individuals in the community, the AET model aims to evolve people, entities and the larger community, taking into account their very own specificity. This leads to another important feature in the AET processes, which is the centrality of the pedagogical team, responsible for the complex task of putting into practice the concepts of such a compound training system. In a way, we could say that AET could create "*settings that promote communal and personal stories and listen more carefully to the voices telling those stories*" (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995: 571) and therefore constituting an empowering **intervention**. However, if we want to assess the real impact of this training model, we cannot rely solely on the existing evaluation, as we shall see.

The two available reports on the AET training that took place in Portugal, in the period between 2000 and 2003 (Canelas, 2002; Canelas, 2004), essentially show qualitative data such as the regional characteristics of the AET courses' Portuguese offer, the profile of the pedagogical team, the **RVPL** process and the curricular construction, assessing the opinions of different actors through questionnaires and regional reports. The representativeness of the sample wasn't an issue, since the objective of these questionnaires was to "*draw the AET's universe*" (Canelas, 2004: 34). The total number of respondents taken into analysis (trainers, mediators, trainees and promoting entities) was about 4595 (*ibid.*).

Results show that interventions based on this model are growing in number and in importance. One of the findings reflects the particular social characteristics of the participants in the AET courses: adults from disenfranchised groups (particularly those benefiting from state minimum income) and unemployed active adults (*ibid.*: 38), which lead us to reflect on adapted methodologies for these populations. One other result indicates that women are more represented than men (about 80%, concentrating

on the ages of 25-34) (*ibid.*: 39), suggesting that women are more available to take the opportunities of qualification.

As far as the curriculum is concerned, the **Life Themes** classes were considered the most effective, becoming the most participative "place", as referred by the trainees, contributing to their involvement and interest in training, while collectively deciding local relevant themes to work. More than that, all aspects referring to the curricular planning and development tend to generate the participation of trainees, independently of the area concerned (*ibid.*: 91).

Results show that the RVPL process is considered as a very positive experience, characterised by the specificity of occurring mostly in individual sessions, which allows the trainee to assume his/her responsibility and develop motivation towards the learning process (*ibid.*), however, the main difficulties related by the respondents were exactly in articulating the results of the **RVPL** process and the **General Training**, due to the novelty and complexity of the training model. This also happened in the evaluation of the **Learning with Autonomy** classes.

**Vocational Training** is considered a major strength of the training process and it's the participants preferred area (namely to the younger participants in the B3 option), probably because it's where the trainees have real contact with working experiences, as stated in the reports (*ibid.*: 104).

Finally, the results documented in both reports undoubtedly indicate that *«the social value of this initiative: adults (...) reveal, in the opinion of mediators and trainers, a strong involvement and interest in the whole process.»* (*ibid.*:128).

### **Empowerment Theory**

Empowerment has, as we could see from the previous analysis, special relevance in adult low-qualified populations, *«frequently at risk of social exclusion»* (Canelas, 2002: 12) and in the development of new methodologies that can be adaptive and effective in this particular group of people, whether we refer to the European context or to the Portuguese particular setting. Research concerning the empowerment construct (Zimmerman *et al.*, 1992; Zimmerman, 1995; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998; Foster-Fishman *et al.*, 1998; Zimmerman, 2000) has

demonstrated that it is multidimensional, depends a great deal on the individual and the context, also varying across time. This theory has been contributing significantly to the understanding and operationalization of this construct and we can observe its major inputs in: empowerment *values* (that theoretically support the programmes), *empowering processes* (designed to promote opportunities of empowerment development) and *empowered outcomes* (as result of empowering processes), which we explain in **Figure 3**:

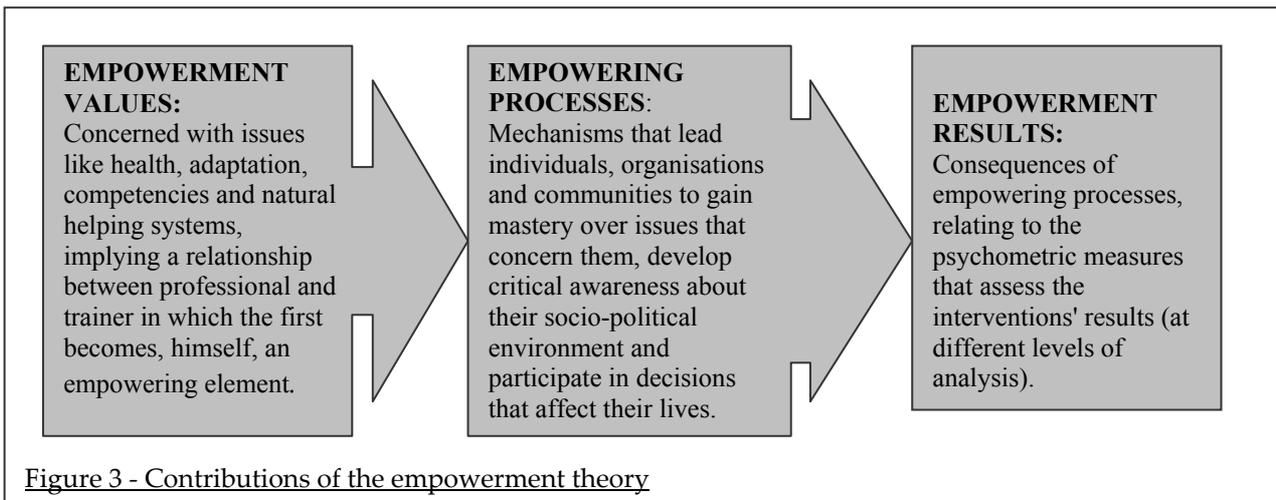


Figure 3 - Contributions of the empowerment theory

Zimmerman's theory (Zimmerman *et al.*, 1992; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000) postulates that empowerment differs across three *levels of analysis*, as shown in **Figure 4**.

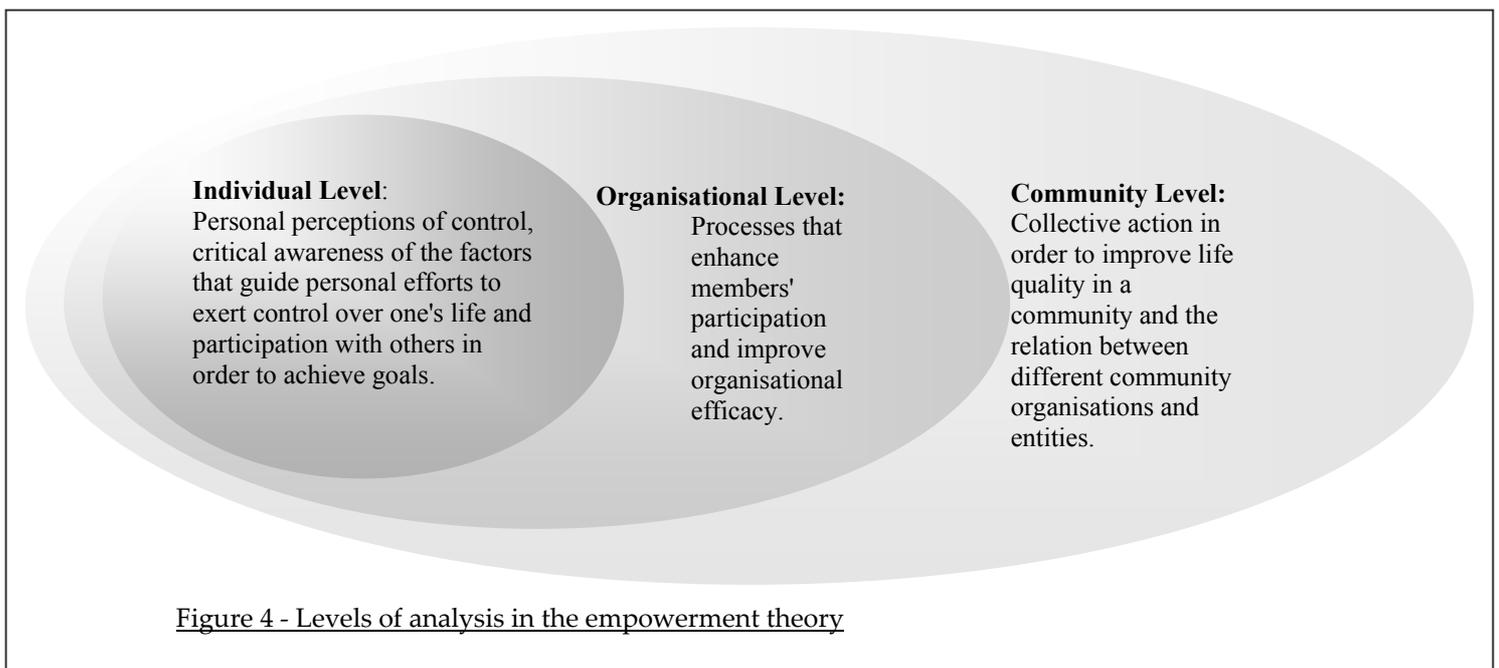


Figure 4 - Levels of analysis in the empowerment theory

We can observe that «*participation or provision of opportunities to participate are common themes across each level.*» (Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998: 6). On the other hand, it is suggested that empowerment is related to three different dimensions: **participation**, **critical awareness** and **control**, understood in each of the three levels of analysis (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991; Zimmerman, 2000).

Finally, the theoretical model of **psychological empowerment** (Zimmerman *et al.*, 1992; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000), as a dimension of the **individual level of analysis**, postulates three components – **intrapersonal**, **interactional** and **behavioral**, which composition we can observe in **Figure 5**:

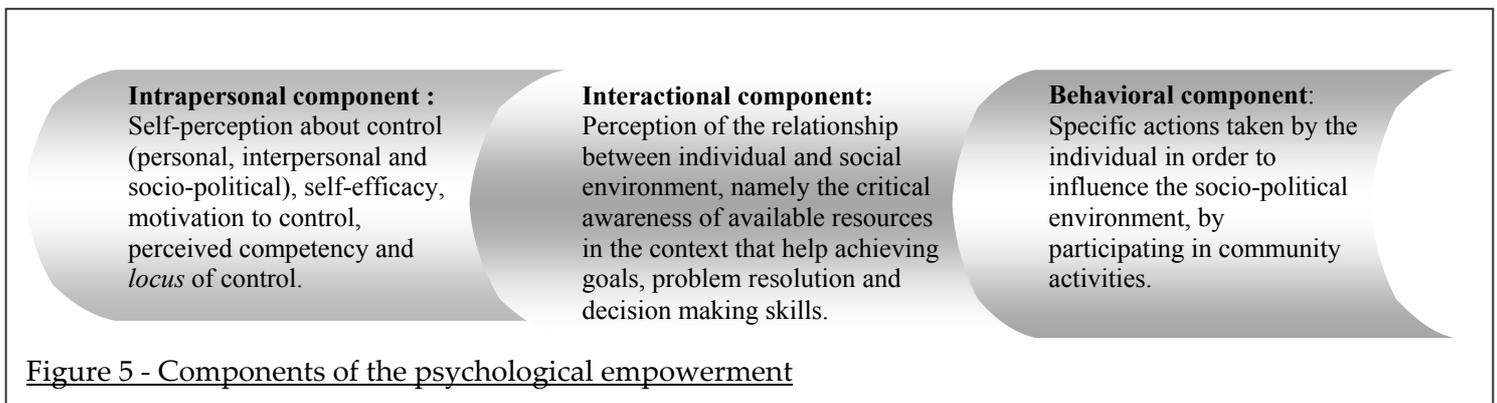


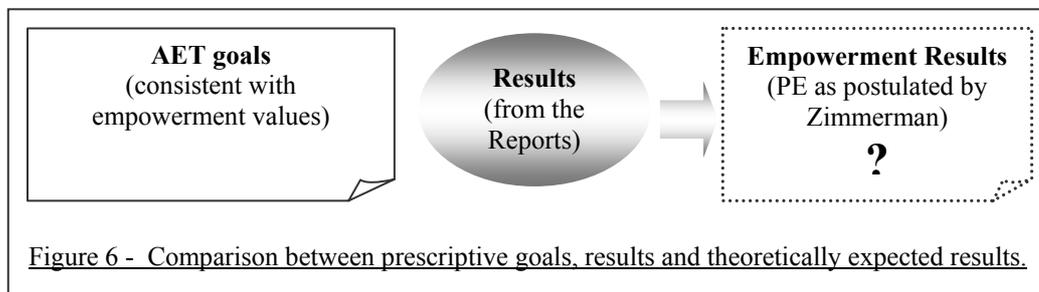
Figure 5 - Components of the psychological empowerment

The author states that **PE** «*may be an open-ended construct that is not easily reduced to a universal set of operational rules and definitions*» (Zimmerman, 1995: 583) and despite its complexity, the relevance of **PE** in the context of AET is, as we shall realise, related to the nuclear position of the trainee as the essential element around which the curriculum and the pedagogical options are built (Canelas, 2002). The participant is seen as someone carrying significant experiences and learning, which cannot be ignored in the training process, thereby consisting the raw material to be explored, developed and certified in the process of training. This emphasis in the individual that AET model states to privilege, lead us to assume that PE is the most appropriate dimension to explore when analysing the impact of this specific training model.

## Psychological Empowerment as a predictor of quality in training

When we talk about quality in training, we refer precisely to the consistency between prescriptive goals and real outcomes, more than to the actors' satisfaction, perceived difficulties or other descriptive dimensions. In fact, this is what's been missing, both in empowerment theory, as far as empirical studies are concerned (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000) and in the AET domain, requiring new forms of assessment (Canelas, 2002; Canelas, 2004).

As we can observe, empowerment is a construct consistent with the AET model's values and described processes. The reports on which this paper has relied, however, show very few about how these values and processes have actually had an impact on each AET participant, i.e., no PE measures have been analysed in the reports. We can state that some interesting dimensions have been captured, like motivation, participation in specific activities, preferences, and some articulation between social characteristics like age, sex, social status (derived from the funding of each course) has been made, however, that is not enough, which lead us to conclude the following information:



Reports refer that trainees' «attitudes and (...) behaviours have changed, being more active and demanding, "creating challenge" (...)» (Canelas, 2004: 94), their self-confidence and autonomy have improved (*ibid.*: 96), as an effect of participating in AET interventions. However, it is also stated that «available elements don't permit the assessment of the concrete effects on reported changes at the level of labour market inclusion. Despite this, these changes (in attitudes and behaviour), along with the acquired resource (academic certification) will undoubtedly contribute to the positive results that might be achieved.» (*ibid.*: 127).

Concluding, we can observe that the AET model, despite its consistency, in what prescriptive goals are concerned, with Zimmerman's theory of empowerment, lacks

further analysis on the articulation between goals, processes and outcomes, which is our main goal in this project.

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