

Representations of illiteracy in France and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) devices for adults facing literacy difficulties

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ABSTRACT This paper will discuss representations of illiteracy in France. Historically, illiteracy in French society has been seen as a handicap. This view of illiteracy is a permanent social representation that has not changed in many years. However, challenges associated with this phenomenon, namely the changing expectations of employers, have changed. In all cases—in the permanence of social representation or the evolution of professional expectation—illiteracy generates professional and social exclusion. As a consequence, people facing literacy difficulties have opted to avoid facing this representation. While it is expected that these people show up to seek support, they put up tricks to escape the stigma. Therefore, identifying people with literacy difficulties occupies a substantial part of the activities of professionals and organisations. The paper will end on a discussion relating to new screening possibilities offered by Prior Learning Recognition devices.

Keywords: Illiteracy, recognition of prior learning, prior learning, literacy, adult learning

Introduction

Looking at employability and the professional paths of illiterate employed or employable adults leads to the necessary study of the status and functions of the written word, of assessment and of skills in the economic and social life of present day society (Crespin & Lenoir, 1998). This issue is not a new one as individuals have, at all times, escaped the effects of compulsory schooling during which they have not acquired the mastery of basic knowledge. The origins of this incapacity, of these resistances, remain quite unknown. Yet, it seems that these situations are more critical than before, considering technical evolutions and a more and more systematic resorting to writing in our societies, even if, among those people, many have produced and produce skills through avoidance strategies which enable them to keep their stand in their professional and social environment. The validation of experiential learning or the recognition of prior learning (VAE/RPL) seems to offer possibilities, on one hand, of a remedy to a lack of

mastery of basic knowledge, and could become a tool of the recognition of the multiple skills of illiterate adults; and, on another hand, of enabling them not only to keep their job, but also to get a socially guaranteed and recognised accreditation and qualification, at least, within the framework of French legislation, by having access to recognised forms of legitimacy, the corollary, often, of dignity in the working place and of social respect. But “applicants undertaking VAE procedures are not all on an equal footing. 70% of those applying for level 5 qualifications (ISCED level2) are employed in the field of healthcare and social work. The associations in this sector provide a particularly favourable context for making VAE applications, thanks to the active policies they adopt. They provide their employees with support and cover the cost of accompanying and even training them. Completing the procedure successfully depends on a complex set of factors. The main challenges ahead are reducing the drop-out rates and simplifying the whole procedure” (Labuyère, Quintero & Delanöe, 2010). Is it necessary to recall the fact that one of the bases of social inequalities, subsequent to academic differentiation, is linked to the overestimation of abstract intelligence at the expense of concrete experience, and to the supremacy of an initial curriculum over continuous training? Those overestimations inevitably lead to an underestimation of the formative value of manual and volunteer work. Distinguishing different natures of knowledge is to acknowledge that practice is a source of knowledge that can be recognised through a diploma and “it is just bad luck for the individual who fails his/her initial training as, outside the diploma that has been traditionally obtained, there is not much chance of a second opportunity in adult life... The aim is not to weaken or compete with the traditional routes of initial training, but to set a new balance to the ways and means of accreditation by taking into account the fact that practising a professional or volunteer activity for a number of years produces knowledge, know-how and a life attitude, and that this knowledge acquired through experience calls for recognition and accreditation...” (First reading of the law on social modernisation at the National Assembly).

Representations of illiteracy in France

There are many diffuse representations associating situations of illiteracy to “flaws” and “difficulties in reading and writing that may combine, at various degrees, with an insufficient mastery of such other basic skills as oral communication, logical reasoning, the understanding and use of figures and mathematical operations, landmark taking in space and time, etc.. However, under the effect of the media coverage of a social phenomenon, even if representations evolve very slowly as they are nurtured by a trail of the anguish linked to marginalisation, exclusion and stigmatisation related to a shortage, a lack according to a social norm, the associations and social world that accompany these illiterate people lead us to consider that these people have acquired an experience, culture and capital of competences by leaning on a very poor ability to read or write – if nothing at all”.

Writing as a social norm within the functioning of our societies

There is no salvation outside the ability to read and write, for this ability testifies of an access to culture. Outside the fact that this representation of general knowledge and

culture is very much Euro-centric, it denies the great worth and quality of the "empirically" and "experientially" acquired knowledge of people suffering from real and great difficulties in reading and writing. Writing often appears as the privileged vector of general knowledge, but also as one of the key elements of citizenship, which makes its mastery inescapable. Nobody would dream of denying the fact that the access of all people to reading and writing is an asset in the access to social awareness and active citizenship. Modern history proves it in all circumstances. However, it sometimes happens that awareness comes before the mastery of written codes. Nevertheless, when the professional tutors of this specific audience are being questioned, the obligation to show one's ability in reading and writing appears, in the eyes of some and in certain accreditation devices as a guarantee of citizenship (Lenoir, 2002). It is obvious that reading and writing participate in the access to citizenship in initial training. But wouldn't it be possible to consider that these initial skills are but one form of citizenship and that there are other paths, which would prevent some people from thinking, mechanically and confusedly, that all illiterate adult is, by definition, a non- or an under-citizen who is all the more a victim to manipulation as he/she is far from the mastery of basic knowledge? Thus, for adult audiences, when in situations of illiteracy, required citizenship – which is difficult to measure in initial training – for the delivery of certain diplomas could be implemented through other ways and, in particular, through a relationship of experience.

The illiteracy of executives: a major taboo

Like 2.5 million French people, some executives are in a situation of illiteracy at work. This phenomenon, which is impossible to quantify, escapes all the devices that have been designed in matters of fight and detection. This could guarantee the originality of the population under study and a genuine added value as regards the other European programmes for the fight against illiteracy. The responsibilities these executives have to face make them illiterate people who are particularly submitted to all sorts of pressure.

According to a study by the INSEE, published in December 2012, 7 % of the working population do not sufficiently master reading and writing to make themselves understood or to understand a written text, in spite of at least five years spent in French schools. Nearly 70% of them have a job. It is no real surprise that the least qualified workers are concerned. But those already disturbing figures conceal a taboo: some of these active people (executives, traders, and managers) have, on the contrary, high responsibility positions. How do they manage, considering that illiteracy is an obvious obstacle to an access to responsibilities? And how have they slipped through the net?

For Benoît Hess, a sociologist specialising in illiteracy, these excellent technicians and their expertise hide their difficulties in writing by being very much at ease orally. For Hess, it is harder for an executive to be illiterate than for a chamber maid, since such a situation is experienced as totally shameful and can sometimes lead to tragic extremities as "some people may then commit suicide, in such unbearable conditions." In France Guérin-Pace's typology, a research director at the INED and the author of the report on "Illiteracy and individual routes", Mickaël's case, a trader, typifies those people who have never "acquired the basic skills in reading but have, more or less success-

fully, managed to pass from one grade to the next without ever being able to find a remedy to such a lack". That is, according to the author, he has "never made writing his own."

Writing and the social value of diplomas

There is another frequently proffered argument, the one concerning the symbolical and social value of diplomas, writing appearing as a guarantee in its position in the hierarchy of titles. Is this a constantly verifiable reality or the social stamp of a dominating representation that is shared by many and re-asserted by the "writing elites" who very often owe their position - partly, at least - to their own ability to master writing? Writing, then, often appears as a socially unavoidable proof, except making the very nature of the expression of knowledge evolve. In such a case, the unavoidable nature of writing could be understood. It is "the sequence training, diploma, integration, gradually established during the 20th century, which is now questioned: one can now begin by being integrated in social life and on the labour market before considering the delivery of a diploma" (Millet & Moreau, 2011, p.262). The VAE (Validation of Acquired Experience), which is registered in the codes of education and labour, and its implementation provide training and accreditation organisms the opportunity to enrich their training offers, to invest in new educational practices and to question their functioning gauged in terms of the effects it induces or of the answers to the social expectations it can bring, particularly by welcoming new profiles of individuals likely to integrate their action within lifelong training. Norms therefore are bound to evolve, inducing social changes in spite of the delivery of the same diplomas obtained through different paths, the issue resides in the way individuals will master this acquisition and in the tutorship provided by universities within their mission as a public service and their social and cultural responsibility in order to contribute to "a real re-dealing out of riches... represented in our context by required and acquired knowledge and diplomas" (Debon, 2006, p.205).

Recognition of Prior Learning

In 1934, the first practices of validation of non-formal and informal learning appeared "when engineers without formal qualifications were given the right to access an engineering diploma and thus benefit from wages and benefits commensurate with their activity. But it was not until the 1980's that this approach became more widely adopted – it takes time to undergo the cultural change required for the introduction of a system of validation and adopt the idea that an individual can learn and acquire knowledge and competencies outside formal learning" (Charraud, 2010, p.1).

The VAE/RPL device within the January 2002 Social Modernisation Act allows any individual with a minimum of three years of a social and professional experience to obtain a complete or partial title or diploma. This therefore implies recognising any individual's right to tutorship and the accreditation of his/her experience. Beyond its social

function, VAE/RPL would then become a means of launching new learning dynamics and supporting cognitive processes - associated to self-training logics or not - and an extra lever for “a second opportunity”, in the sense that “lifelong training attempts to situate itself in the continuation of the modern project for equality by promising second opportunity institutions for individuals who have not been able to benefit from the first. It is indeed a little early to judge but the expected efforts appear as limited and the results hardly perceptible for a population with a low level of qualification” (Derouet, 2003, p.77). It seems like a long, complex itineraries with an uncertain outcome where “searching for information, advice, career guidance, positioning recommendations, obtaining confirmation of eligibility, preparing application files , and undergoing assessments: the pathway to obtaining a diploma in France via the Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE) scheme is complex, as many candidates have agreed. They are expected to collect together a large number of resources, such as mentoring services, time, funding, the ability to formulate their work involves, etc., and to combine these resources appropriately. The strong commitment required by all these efforts is often undermined by tensions, most of which are inherent to the scheme itself and make the outcome highly uncertain: although many candidates set out on this path, very few eventually make it to the goal” (Personnaz, Quintero & Séchaud, 2007). All the more so as the dropping out rate is 25 % in the Second Opportunity institutions, marked with a dropping out of 10 % during internship (Dares, 2012), though this population in vocational training is less prone to truancy. However, the organisation modes of these “second opportunity » programmes exist, even if they are different from one European country to another. For that matter, the political, economic and social decision-makers of many countries are well aware of the fact, since they go as far as promoting the institutionalization and internationalization of the RPL processes (Lafont, 2012, 2013), in order ‘to encourage the traceability of acquired knowledge and skills and the clarification of the required skills in companies... finally, to encourage each individual to move on and go on learning all along their lives’ (Merle, 2008, p. 43). However, while the skills thus acquired constitute a rich source of human capital, not all individuals are aware of its potential value, and they do not always benefit from their acquisitions, especially when they find it difficult to prove their skills, or even to see ways to go about writing down those practices or having them written down (Cifali, André, 2007). The recognition of acquired non formal and informal learning does not, in itself, create human capital. However, it makes the stock of human capital more visible, while it increases its value for the whole of society. In fact, it also plays an important part in a certain number of countries by validating people’s skills and by making it possible for them to (re)register to the formal system of learning. Yet can it regulate the dysfunctions of an inegalitarian educational system (Maillard, 2007). Setting up the measures of the Recognition of Prior Learning can, for instance, exempt the candidates from certain classes or parts of a curriculum and allow them to complete their formal education more quickly, more efficiently and with fewer fees, since they do not have to attend classes whose contents they already master. Even if “everywhere around the world, there is a systematization of measures and processes enabling adults to identify their skills” (Boutinet, Belisle, 2009, p. 3). In their vast majority, they make it possible to complete basic education or the first years of secondary school free. “This free offer is

accountable by the fact that the adults who have left the school system before completing those levels often belong to the most vulnerable groups in society and, therefore, are the object of many political interventions” (Eurydice, 2011, p.62). The VAE/RPL can help “to correct the choices made by individuals between going into long studies and entering active life. Many have been forced to drop out of school and they see in the VAE/RPL a second opportunity, even revenge. According to an agent, the VAE/RPL “makes it possible to erase certain inequalities, in relationship with those who have been able to go into long studies ». The VAE/RPL comes as atonement for a feeling of injustice” (CNFPT, 2009, p.8).

During the tutoring stage, it is certainly necessary to prepare the VAE/RPL candidates for its evaluative and summative dimension. It is a well-known fact that assessment causes inhibition and nervousness. It will therefore be necessary to de-dramatise it in order to avoid, for the candidates, a new traumatic experience, even in the case of partial success. For this purpose, new assessment modes and procedures have to be conceived, adapted tools to be built and assessors to be trained.

Academic writing over-determines the choice of the validation of acquired experience device and reveals a deep contradiction between the professional issues and the academic issues of the VAE/RPL. This could subsequently question the social value of the titles and accreditations thus obtained. Nevertheless, the validation of acquired experience causes changes in the self-perception of the individuals who are or have been involved in it, whether it is in the image they have of themselves or the one they present to the outside world. In other words, the VAE/RPL makes it possible to see and feel different by oneself and for the others, in a positive way, and also to be perceived as “different” by one’s environment. Beyond the self-confidence it re-activates or allows, validation enables individuals to launch into new personal and/or professional dynamics, which find their source and support in the recognition of the social value of experience - materialised by having obtained and by possessing a title or a diploma. A social recognition, whose concrete and probably dis-inhibiting effects are new initiatives, an easier communication, a greater autonomy, a form of permission to move on. Validation implies a reference to a norm, as recognition and validation form a process “aiming at identifying, formalising and socially recognising knowledge and skills acquired through action ; in other words, they concern the clarification of the conditions of production of this knowledge and the process making awareness and formalisation possible in order to gain social validation” (Delory-Monberger, 2003, p. 69). The nature of these norms is crucial and will greatly determine whether the results of validation are dependable or not. If a norm is too local, it may have a negative impact on transferability; if it is too general and lacks flexibility, it may prevent validation from clearly defining the essence of the experience of individual learning.

VAE/RPL devices for adults facing literacy difficulties

Specific initiatives are carried out, for example to help job-seekers, the disabled, civil servants, prisoners who want to benefit from VAE, via specific guidance or funding. It is why evidence of benefits to individuals was associated, to “allow” an individual to identify and gain recognition for his/her knowledge, skills and competencies acquired

through professional and personal experiences. Benefits are linked to the acquisition of a recognised qualification, and therefore it is very important to devote time at the beginning of the validation process to select the qualification most in relation with the professional or personal project of the applicants. In the case of workers who apply to VAE, this may be negotiated with the employer. Achieving a qualification through VAE brings personal benefits to individuals, such as improving their personal profile, capacities and self-confidence. It motivates individuals for further studies or training. VAE improves the employability of individuals and may also help the individual in his / her job and/or future career development, as it helps to facilitate internal or external mobility, etc. VAE is also seen as an opportunity to save time and money compared to the cost and duration linked to the acquisition of the same qualification within formal education (including when the applicant only gets validation for in some units of the qualification)" (Charraud, 2010, p.13). But in matters of VAE/RPL particularly for adults facing illiteracy - the suspicion on their incapacity is constant - it is essential for a material element to be able to prove the reality of acquisitions so as to avoid all form of depreciation. What is at stake is the credibility and the "quality" of accreditation, therefore its accessibility and social usage. It should allow adults facing illiteracy to have access to a title or a diploma through this new means, as complement to initial or continuous training. Once this principle is defined and accepted, it raises the question of the value of the knowledge acquired by workers and employees in under-qualified working situations and by people whose academic knowledge is uncertain and/or incomplete. To this central issue is added the issue of the emergence and formalisation of knowledge acquired through action, often unsuspected by the actors themselves. How is it possible to have these populations formalise their knowledge, when the use of reading and writing is scarce and/or limited? Resorting to oral formalisation and to professional or social real-life situations is probably one of the tracks to explore, along with other modes of formalisation. What, therefore, are the consequences relative to the tutorship concerning "methodological help"? In other terms and in spite of the well-known difficulties of the act of writing, must the VAE/RPL be based on the fact of writing one's experience or on a real-life situation? Or is it possible to grant - or not - the same status and the same value to an oral, schematised, "image-based" formalisation of knowledge acquired through action in the VAE/RPL device?

The professionals of training consider the procedure of the validation of acquired experience as legitimate and possible for adults facing illiteracy in so far as experience at work, obviously, allows the construction and acquisition of knowledge and skills. In any case, what "can be asserted is that validation changes the perception individuals had on their activity, concerning both the interest of their work and its social usefulness, and it gives new meaning and new value to their work" (Alballéa and al, 2007, p.16). However, whereas the candidates and the professionals agree that experience contributes to the production of "credible" knowledge and/or skills, the form and modes of accreditation - real-life situation or written formalisation - remain problematic and complex. Systematically resorting to writing may appear as a way of excluding from the VAE/RPL part of the adults facing illiteracy; its absence may seem reducing, and even cause a certain devaluation of accreditation; it may compromise the opportunity of the VAE/RPL as a possibility to make one's own and re-energize the knowledge of domes-

tic writing. There appears to be a contradiction between the professional outcomes of validation and those of the academic requirements linked to accreditation. For several years, however, public policies have been supporting the principle according to which the actual operational nature of the validation of acquired knowledge must be linked to a registration into the logics of a professional path, in spite of the fact of considering that “the VAE/RPL is essentially understood nowadays as an “acknowledgement” of acquired skills to be accredited in reference with complete professional titles and diplomas. In that sense, it is not really adapted to those many people who may wish or need to credit certain skills without aiming, at the same time, at obtaining a complete diploma. It is therefore not certain that the improvement of the VAE/RPL procedures is sufficient for it to be a real tool for professional promotion and “second opportunity”. In order to secure professional routes, a more ambitious approach of the VAE/RPL should be considered. The VAE/RPL as mere “stock-taking”, by targeting a precise profession, is therefore ill-adapted to people who have had a chaotic professional career or who are in retraining” (Besson, 2008, p.29).

“Undeniably, the VAE/RPL device aims at the construction of real public policies of accreditation inside and outside training institutions” (Lamy, 2007, p. 442). It results in a consensual agreement between politicians, but also between trade unions and employers, around the concept of the equality of opportunities. Thus, while the State asserts the will to secure professional paths by developing devices aimed at better protecting employees and at helping them to be more mobile when faced with the uncertainties of professional and social life, the VAE/RPL is included in this strategy aiming at reactivating the notions of activation, the gaining of autonomy and responsibility of people towards their professional routes. Thus, the requirement of activation on the part of the individuals concerned appears from the very beginning of their validation path, when they attempt—whether they are tutored or not – to define a “strategy” in order to achieve the accreditation of their experience.

Another element of interrogation, another factor of exclusion in the VAE/RPL process is “general culture”, inseparable from reading and writing in western culture, and particularly dominant in the representations and the organisation of certain diplomas in France. Once more, this conception of accreditation reveals the protean dimension of knowledge and the outcomes of their validation, whether the point of view is work and qualification or social recognition and the hierarchy of titles. On the one hand, a rather pragmatic approach of the knowledge acquired through action, on the other hand, a tendency to recognise it merely through an academic gauge and in its most classical and normative forms of expression. Thus, the requirement of “general culture” in its written and academic manifestation—in certain devices—becomes a new obstacle in the process of the validation of acquired experience of adults facing illiteracy, who, in spite of their life stories and career paths, are seen as lacking all element of culture. The reason why the assertion of individuals considered as subjects in themselves is so much diffused is that it sounds as an answer to the uncertainties of social and career paths (Rincquesen, Rossin, Boisson, 2010) – an answer which, within the framework of the VAE/RPL, opposes a liberal notion of the right to training and another notion, centred on the collective guarantees that are provided in the access to training and the management of career paths. The validation or training career through

the VAE/RPL, which seems to be a mere modality of the building of a career and social path, is, nonetheless, a “recognition career” (Ricoeur, 2004). Thus, the candidates evolve according to their “careers” with all their “uncertainties” and fuzzy outlines according to their professional and social life-stories, between adaptation careers, “individual responsibility”, and political and institutional injunctions in a society “attempting to disengage itself from collective responsibilities” (Liétard, 1993, p.6).

Exchanges and orientations of partnership action within the framework of an Erasmus programme

While the aim of such a programme is to improve the quality and strengthen the European dimension of adult education by providing greater possibilities to have access to a better lifelong training, the tutorship of the candidates is of essential importance, which should lead to a new outlook on the tutors’ training. For adults facing illiteracy, it appears that the upstream phase of obtaining accreditation is critical, since indeed the involvement or not in a route to success depends on that phase. It seems a determining element that communication on the device, the constraints and the expectations of the VAE/RPL, must be particularly well organised in order to raise the obstacles and resistances at all levels - individual and organisational - concerning the VAE/RPL. Finally, tutorship cannot be conceived without the issue of the position and part played by tutors being evoked and defined, from the point of view both of methodology and of deontology. For this purpose, some people consider that, for a satisfying reliability and quality of the procedure, the tutors should be trained and even get involved in a process of professionalization.

While the VAE/RPL is bound to find its full stand in the management of human resources and the development of potentials, it cannot be seen as self-sufficient, and one cannot do without other, more classical modes of learning. That is the reason why employees facing illiteracy expect flexible modalities, with training actions aiming at the acquisition or the re-enforcement of basic knowledge. Systematically resorting to reading or writing within strictly academic logics at the expense of professional logics, would result in excluding many skilled adults facing illiteracy from certain possibilities of accreditation and social and/or employment recognition. On the other hand, a complete absence of a reading and writing examination could result in a social devaluation of certain titles. What is at stake, therefore, is acknowledging the possibilities to formalise knowledge and skills orally (Waquet, 2003). Thus, beside its social effects, the validation of prior learning may help as a trigger to get involved or re-involved in learning dynamics – all the more necessary as there are fewer and fewer jobs that do not mobilise reading and writing, or the use of communication technologies, which call for a vast basic knowledge. Thus, the validation of skills or experience only, through observation and real life situations, could not encourage the expression of knowledge. However, these quotations clearly show that the adults facing illiteracy acquire competences and skills through social and/or professional experience which may become valuable in recognition systems. This type of accreditation has the advantage and drawback of not resorting to reading and writing in the delivery of a partial or complete accreditation. This system is attractive since it is more accessible to adults facing illiteracy and aiming

at accreditation. Yet, it has the disadvantage of not mobilising the often unsuspected or denied abilities and knowledge—simple as they may be—in reading and writing (Lahire, 1993) that lower-class adults sometimes use in their domestic and/or professional environment and that would allow them to make the acts of reading and writing their own again and to use them for their own benefit and self-recognition. Reading and writing—thus re-invested—would recover their full meaning and could result in new learning dynamics of this technique of expression and its social usage. Real-life situations on the work site or re-enacted in an accreditation centre are the other paths to the validation of acquired experience. Is this possibility accessible or not to adults facing illiteracy? What are, according to our interlocutors, its benefits and its limits? Does such a process make it possible to obtain guarantees concerning proofs that would be as reliable as those provided by written tests? Have the partial or complete accreditations thus obtained the same value and the same recognition as those acquired through written examinations?

Oral evaluation and the validation of prior learning

Whatever the symbolical and social value given to a written formalisation and its stand in the process of the validation of prior learning of adults facing illiteracy, it seems impossible not to evoke the possibility of wording this learning, whose degree of formalisation and social value could be equivalent to the written form of such an experience. It is obvious that such a hypothesis—beyond the fact of affecting the criteria of summative and academic assessment—would need to be thoroughly examined in order to gauge to what extent an oral formalisation would equal or not other modes of the expression of knowledge, when one knows (Pastré, 1990) the great difficulty even the most titled scientific students have in describing, analysing, then formalising knowledge acquired through action. This hypothesis therefore implies—beyond necessary experiments—research work on the modes of expression of experience-acquired knowledge and on the various means of its layout for the purpose of communication and accreditation, therefore of social and professional recognition. Validation, therefore, is not always an end in itself, an achievement. It can also become a pretext for new personal and organisational involvements, an extra lever to encourage the access for the largest possible majority of people to basic knowledge, as much for "employability" purposes as for a greater autonomy in their every day and domestic environment. In this context, the VAE/RPL—combined or not with training actions—becomes not only legitimately utilitarian by answering individual and collective outcomes of recognition and qualification within the framework of the evolutions and requirements of the labour market, it is transcended into a tool of progress and social justice. More even, it reactivates and gives reality to the concept of "second opportunity", dear to many actors of the training of adults. It then appears as a means at the service of educational policies aiming at transforming the command of lifelong learning into a tangible reality.

Validation and Assessment

The French career guidance system has existed for many years, although until relatively recently, guidance provision and structures were better developed in general education

(for junior and senior high school pupils and students). Moreover, “for a number of years now the labour market has been increasingly characterised by transition (with people moving from job to job or in an out of work) and by rapid socioeconomic and technological transformation. As a result, people in jobs and those seeking them need to adapt to upheaval and change throughout their working lives. Numerous structures have been put in place to support people through these changes, with provision depending in most cases on the status of the individuals concerned. Lifelong career guidance has become the main theme” (Cedefop, 2008).

The purpose of all validation of knowledge through experience is to obtain a complete or partial title. Consequently, the final stage of tutoring is a summative assessment, either within the framework of a demonstration of competences in acts, or in the appreciation of the candidate’s written portfolio, or during the interview, or within the framework of complementary tests required by the assessment jury. It seems absolutely necessary to give the right advice to the future VAE/RPL candidates so that they can make the best possible choice concerning the procedures and title that are best adapted to their personal and professional situation. It means both de-dramatising and professionalising on the part of the tutor, which is essential for the achievement and the success of the process. Is the issue not, then, to insert the recognition of prior learning into an institutional framework which, before anything else, has favoured and still favours science as such, or knowledge as such? Training organisms and institutions entitled to deliver vocational titles or national diplomas should not merely associate the validation device with a combination of proofs that the candidates are constrained to defend, and that, therefore, the jury is required to estimate. In other words, it seems necessary to highlight the way vocational and educational institutions attribute an academic value to individual experience, with the implementation of the VAE/RPL devices and the forms of recognition connected to those devices. How do they participate in new social experiences and how does the reflexivity on their practices constitute an engine for changes? In a broader sense, the new social experiences generated by the VAE/RPL devices seem liable to accompany a cultural change concerning the consideration of individual and collective human experience in training organisms, also concerning the consideration of individual learning and its participation in collective learning, finally, concerning the consideration of labour and the latter’s relationship to the building of identities and knowledge. “The key-question is that of the measurement of experience. Experience is acquired in labour and in various social spheres, but its wording and restitution require a difficult reflexive process, even more so for people with a low level of training” (Agulhon, 2011, p. 11).

Conclusion

So that adults facing illiteracy can have access to the recognition of prior learning, it is necessary, first, to study all the procedures upstream, then the forms of manifestations of the proof, whether it is written, oral or in a real-life situation. In that sense, it seems appropriate not only to build assessment devices with adapted indicators and criteria, but also, probably, to train the assessors. For adults facing illiteracy involved in a VAE/RPL route, tutorship—considered as a preparatory stage to assessment—appears as a

determining passage which cannot be based only on volunteer work and an individualised procedure (which does not exclude exchanges and explanations in group work). Such tutorship probably implies the professionalization of the VAE/RPL tutors. Finally, in spite of the interest for the recognition of prior learning of individuals and organisations, it cannot be a substitute to all training action aiming at acquiring or re-acquiring basic knowledge. Nevertheless, it would result in reducing the sources of inequalities in the access to education (Baudelot & Establet, 1982), partly determined by school careers, in the sense that it is necessary to consider the validation path as a training path and a parry against the reproduction of social inequalities. In that sense, validation would lay the foundations of a deep change in the relationship society has with training. The validation procedure appears then, in itself, as a sequence of instants and acts of life training, encouraging the candidates to take up and strengthen prior learning. What's more, it helps people to know themselves better, in order to recognize themselves and to make themselves recognized, because the candidates are asked to implement reflexivity, constituting "a counterpart currently required of individuals asking for assistance, status or social protection" (Astier, 2007, p.51). Originated in the validation of knowledge acquired through experience, "the devices participate in the dynamics of social transformation through their implementation. At the core of collective devices of recognition and accreditation, it postulates the construction and reconstruction of social clashes inherent to the social distinction of individuals and groups, while, at the same time, new borders and new definitions of their autonomy, as of their subjection, are re-invented" (Cherqui-Houot, 2011, p. 172).

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NOTES

10 French National Institute of Economic and Statistical Information

11. Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques.

12. In the European Common Principles on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (2004), we observe a shift to the valuation of competencies developed in all possible learning environments. We refer to this as the process of Valuation of Prior Learning. 'Valuing learning' is in a way *dealing with half-filled glasses instead of the old, traditional half-empty ones!* Other terms used to describe the process are Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning, Recognition of Prior Learning or (in French) Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience.

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