

Skills recognition and validation – complexity and tensions

Dr **Carmen Cavaco**

School of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Lisbon, Portugal

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SUMMARY

This article seeks to identify and examine the reasons for the complexity and tensions underlying the skills recognition, accreditation and certification scheme (SRAC) that has been in place in Portugal since 2001. Empirical data were collected through semi-directive interviews with staff in three Centros Novas Oportunidades [CNOs] [New Opportunity Centres] (organisations delivering the SRAC process), and biographical interviews with adults who have completed the scheme. The complex nature of the assumptions associated with skills recognition and accreditation practices and the tensions raised by their underlying paradox are important factors. It is the particular features of the aspects that SRAC practices analyse and assess, i.e. prior experiential learning, that generate this complex nature. These practices are marked by a paradox that arises because these processes, initially based on a humanist approach, are currently linked to a very different ideology. This complexity and these tensions are reflected in the way skills recognition and accreditation schemes are organised and function, and are evident in the comments of staff in the CNOs studied, who play a key role in managing such complexities and tensions.

Introduction

This article is based on data compiled for a doctoral research project in education sciences and adult education. The principal objective of the project was to understand the rationale behind the education and training initiatives undertaken by adults with little schooling in a particular region of Portugal. The research took an ethnomethodological approach and was based on a regional case study.

The article focuses on one area of this research – skills recognition, accreditation and certification practices. In interviews with CNO staff it became apparent that their work is complex and involves tensions. The aim of this article is to identify and analyse why it is complex and why tensions arise, and data were therefore analysed with a view to understanding and justifying the reasons for these phenomena, drawing wherever possible on the relevant theory.

The analysis of skills recognition, accreditation and certification practices shows that tension is generated largely by the ‘paradox that lies in the fact that a humanist spirit is associated with policies and practices which run counter to that founding spirit’ (Canário, 2006, p. 35). Meanwhile, the nature of what is being analysed – prior experiential learning – also explains the complexity of the skills recognition, accreditation and certification scheme. This complexity has an impact on all aspects of the process and is particularly evident in its organisation and functioning and in the tools used in the recognition stage. As can be seen throughout the article, the comments of staff in the Centres studied very clearly reveal the tensions and dilemmas raised by these factors.

The first part of the article identifies the methodology used to collect the empirical data that helped to structure this analysis. The second part is a brief overview of the skills recognition, accreditation and certification scheme (SRAC). The third part outlines the stages of the SRAC process. The fourth part identifies the assumptions behind SRAC schemes and examines how they make the practices involved more complex. The fifth part establishes the predominant logic on which SRAC schemes are based and its implications for their organisation and functioning. The sixth part explains some of the consequences of the complex nature of the tools used at the recognition stage and the tensions that they create. The seventh and final part is the conclusion.

Methodology

The discussion of the issues set out in this article is based on empirical data collected in three CNOs that came into operation between 2001 and 2002 in the Alentejo (a region in the south of Portugal). In empirical terms the research into the SRAC process looked at three levels of analysis: the macro, the meso and the micro.

At macro-level the aim was to identify policy guidelines on skills recognition, accreditation and certification at international, European and national level and to examine its link with lifelong learning. At meso-level the aim was to characterise SRAC practices in the three Centres under study in order to examine the organisation and functioning of the scheme (e.g. the difficulties, constraints, potential and outcomes associated with it). At micro-level the aim was to find out about the adults awarded certificates through SRAC processes (their life path, their knowledge, their interests), and their perceptions of these practices (reasons for enrolling, perceptions of the various stages, perceptions of outcomes).

The macro-level analysis was essentially a desk review (e.g. legislation and reports on international, European and national policy guidelines). At meso-level data connected with the implementation of the SRAC practices used in the three Centres under study were analysed (e.g. number of adults involved, number of adults awarded certificates, age, gender, occupational situation), and semi-directive interviews were carried out with the respective staff (eight SRAC practitioners, seven SRAC trainers and three coordinators). The micro-level analysis was based on biographical interviews with 14 adults awarded certificates by the Centres under study.

The skills recognition, accreditation and certification scheme

The SRAC process came into effect in Portugal in 2001 with the creation of the *Centros de Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências* [Skills Recognition, Accreditation and Certification Centres], now the New Opportunity Centres. These Centres recognise, accredit and certify skills acquired by adults throughout life in various contexts (family, social, occupational and educational/vocational training).

The SRAC process is geared towards adults over 18 years of age who have not completed the 12th year of schooling. The certificates awarded refer to level B1 (4th year of schooling), B2 (6th year of schooling), B3 (9th year of schooling) and B4 (12th year of schooling). This analysis focuses only on the basic level scheme (up to the 9th year of schooling).

Some CNOs currently also offer a scheme providing for the recognition, accreditation and certification of vocational skills. The 269

CNOs, distributed throughout Portugal, are overseen by the *Agência Nacional para a Qualificação* [National Qualifications Agency] (a body supervised jointly by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour), and are hosted by public organisations (e.g. schools, training centres) and private organisations (NGOs, companies, associations). Each CNO has a team consisting of a coordinator, SRAC ⁽¹⁾ practitioners, SRAC ⁽²⁾ trainers and administrative staff.

The key skills reference framework is the tool around which CNO staff organise and develop the SRAC process. The basic education framework used in the Centres consists of four key skills areas (maths for life, language and communication, citizenship and employability and information and communication technologies). Each key skill involves three levels of complexity that represent the three levels of schooling that can be certified (4th year, 6th year and 9th year).

The decision on the level of schooling to be attributed to the adults concerned depends on two factors in particular: their level of schooling on enrolment and the skills they are able to demonstrate throughout the various stages of the process. The organisation and functioning of the SRAC scheme is defined at national level in specific legislation. The infancy and complex nature of this policy area, however, allow CNO staff to exercise a certain degree of independence.

Stages of the scheme

The scheme consists of five stages: the first involves enrolment, diagnosis and guidance, the second relates to recognition, the third focuses on accreditation, the fourth concerns training and the fifth covers certification. In the first stage (enrolment and guidance), CNO staff seek to assess whether or not the adults involved have the profile to undertake the SRAC process. If on enrolment the staff consider them to have a profile allowing them to undertake the process, they go on to the second stage (recognition), and if not they are directed towards other more appropriate education and/or training opportunities.

During the recognition stage they attend a series of individual and/or group sessions in which they organise their portfolio, together with

(1) SRAC practitioners are higher education graduates in the social and human sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology, education sciences).

(2) SRAC trainers are qualified to teach in each key skills area.

CNO staff. To build this portfolio the adults identify and bring together information on their life paths, and reflect upon and describe their experiences and prior experiential learning. Recognition is the longest stage of the process and is the one that demands greater involvement and commitment on the part of the adults concerned. It is also at this stage, in which methodology, tools and monitoring are crucial, that the complexity of the SRAC process and the tension caused by the two strands underpinning the scheme become more evident.

The third stage (accreditation) is divided into two parts. The first part, overseen by the team of practitioners in the Centres, involves a skills assessment based on a comparison between each adult's prior experiential learning, identified during the recognition sessions, and the reference framework skills. The second is an open session before an accreditation panel whose task is to formalise the accreditation. It is made up of an external assessor who acts as chair, and the SRAC staff who worked with the adult throughout the process (SRAC practitioners and trainers).

As a rule, only adults considered to be in a position to obtain full accreditation are invited to appear before the panel. If they wish, however, they may apply for partial accreditation. In this situation they can return to the Centre for two years to obtain full accreditation, which gives them a qualification certifying a particular level of education. This only occurs from time to time in the CNOs in question because adults who do not have the right profile to obtain full accreditation are directed towards other education and training opportunities.

The fourth stage (training) takes place between the first and second parts of the accreditation stage. It is undertaken only by adults who cannot demonstrate a number of skills during the recognition process. Training involves a total of 50 hours for the four key skills areas as a whole, and is delivered by the respective trainers. Trainers in the Centres under study usually opt to organise and promote activities that allow trainees to demonstrate their skills. They seek to keep the presentation of information to a minimum, but when they do present information, they try to ensure that it is backed up by these activities.

The fifth stage (certification) is the final stage. Certificates are awarded to adults who obtain full skills accreditation before the accreditation panel. The certificate is issued by the Ministry of Education and is to all intents and purposes equivalent to that obtained in the regular education system.

Assumptions – reasons for the complexity of practices

SRAC policies and practices are essentially based on two key ideas. They start on the one hand from the assumption that people learn by experience. It is crucial, on the other, for such learning to be socially visible. Underlying these ideas are assumptions that people generate what they know throughout their lives and that such knowledge, resulting from prior experiential learning, may be subject to an accreditation process. These two apparently simple notions have a range of implications in terms of the organisation and functioning of prior learning recognition schemes, and contribute greatly to the complexity of the practices involved. This is the context in which Pineau (1997) considers that the ‘two simple ideas inherent in recognition raise complex problems’ (p. 12).

These two notions raise the question that is felt to be fundamental in reflection on the meaning, relevance and feasibility of prior learning accreditation policies and practices: ‘Can experiential knowledge be transformed into academic knowledge?’ (Jobert, 2005, p. 12). Prior experiential learning accreditation policies are based on the principle that such a transformation is possible. In allowing the knowledge arising out of action to be exploited, and in establishing links between the latter and theoretical knowledge, SRAC practices are underpinned by very difficult processes which raise questions for CNO staff.

Theoretical know-how and know-how arising from action are very distinct in nature and involve irreducible differences, making any process that seeks to merge or superimpose them problematic and artificial. The recognition of prior learning, based on the match between experiential know-how and the skills listed in a reference framework, is a rather complex task about which very little is known. This also raises other questions: ‘What do we know how to do? What do we know about the nature of this type of process?’ (Jobert, 2005, p. 12). What risks are associated with it? How can we develop in this area? The obstacles, difficulties and doubts inherent in the recognition of prior learning encountered every day by staff in the Centres under study are largely a result of our ignorance of experiential learning processes and of the ‘epistemological touchstone of knowledge about knowledge, or of the sparse knowledge about our knowledge’ (Pineau, 1997, p. 12).

These questions lead back to the complex nature of the work carried out by CNO staff. The comments of staff in the CNOs under study reveal the difficulties inherent in the process of accrediting prior experiential learning. These practitioners face difficulties deriving from the specific nature of what is being examined and assessed – life experience and skills. The limited knowledge of experiential learning processes and of the nature of the know-how resulting from action hinder the recognition and accreditation process. The need to establish links between know-how arising out of action and academic know-how (reference framework skills) make this process highly complex.

The elements of complexity underlying the process of accrediting prior experiential learning require CNO staff constantly to construct and reconstruct their work practices. The difficulties in completing the process and the need to find appropriate solutions to problems and to make constant adjustments are aspects highlighted by interviewees. A CNO coordinator said that *'it was obviously a real nightmare for us to set up; and keeping it running smoothly is just as bad'*. This is corroborated by a SRAC practitioner: *'when I got here I came up against a wall that I could only get over by working at it, with teamwork and then with experience with the adults themselves and the process itself, because it was difficult'*. In trying to overcome the difficulties, staff often reformulated the scheme's organisation and functioning: *'we're always changing things, I've been here for two years and we've changed dozens of times'* (SRAC practitioner).

What CNO staff have to say bears witness to how difficult it is to draw out skills from each adult's life path, based on the key skills framework: *'It's been a constant battle, that's the really hard thing for me. We have to be able to recognise prior know-how rather than academic know-how'* (SRAC practitioner). The need to analyse and establish links between different elements (know-how arising out of action and theoretical know-how) makes staff members apprehensive and anxious: *'[our main difficulty] lies in particular in the tools that we use, that transition between the life history, the person's path and the framework skills'* (CNO coordinator). Vincent Merle (2005, p. 55) states with respect to this process that 'rather than thinking about transubstantiation between know-how acquired through experience and academic know-how, as if they were identical substances, we should instead be thinking about forging links'. CNO staff should not try to establish comparisons between elements which are incomparable from the outset, though they do need to find such 'links', which is neither an easy nor an immediate task.

From humanism to individual responsibility

SRAC schemes involve a paradox arising from the coexistence of two opposing ideologies – humanism and individual responsibility. The most recent policy documents on the accreditation of prior learning draw largely on the latter ideology. Public policies seek to extend and raise the profile of prior learning accreditation processes as active employment strategies supporting human resources management. In this case, such policies and practices form part of lifelong learning and are governed by the values of individualism, responsibility and competitiveness.

These policies and practices are part and parcel of a broader strategy in which adults are held responsible for *managing themselves*. ‘Biographical solutions’ (Lima, 2005, p. 54) are used to try to resolve structural problems, such as the low level of schooling of the Portuguese population and unemployment. In this case, the harnessing of adult experience is seen from a managerial perspective, and the political commitment to SRAC practices is largely a result of the fact that they allow more adults to be certified in less time with fewer (human and financial) resources in comparison with other options that are available.

The first prior experiential learning accreditation practices were based on humanist ideology. Now, although the purposes of the policies and practices concerned are dominated by the ideology of individual responsibility, the influence of humanism on the methods and tools adopted remains significant. These methods and tools are based on an epistemological reappraisal of adult experience, and as they focus on reflection upon and explanations of experience, they have the potential to foster the personal development of the adults involved.

The prior experiential learning accreditation practices that have appeared in the last decade take a dual approach which draws on ‘different conceptions of man’ (Berger, 1991, p. 241). Two types of thinking coexist in the respective practices and policies: a thinking modelled on the humanist perspective, according to which it becomes possible and relevant, societally, to develop prior experiential learning accreditation schemes that make it possible to make the most of people, their practices and their life paths, and another type of thinking modelled on the ideology of individual responsibility, according to which the schemes are used to enhance human resources management and competitiveness and to increase social control over people.

The SRAC practices emerging in Portugal in recent years fall within education and training policies geared towards human resources management, yet are based on innovative methods of exploiting people's experience. The coexistence of these two types of thinking causes tensions and contributes to the increasing complexity of these social practices, as can be seen from comments by CNO staff:

'The Centre has targets to meet, we work with people, we take a humanist approach to work [...] it's no good thinking that I have to reach 300 by the end of the year, that's it for me! We work with people, and having a figure that I don't agree with foisted on me doesn't suit the type of work we do, which has to be people-centred. [...] I want to be happy in my work and ethically happy' (*SRAC practitioner*).

The following comment from another interviewee also highlights this tension:

'It's impossible to guarantee quality in mass production work. The team sometimes works much longer than its [normal] working hours to achieve acceptable levels of quality. Either we forget quality and meet the targets, or we forget targets and maintain quality' (*SRAC practitioner*).

The coexistence of these two perspectives within the framework of prior learning policies and practices has a direct impact on methods and tools, as can be seen:

'some people probably need a longer process, even if it's just to try out other approaches, to try to do things differently – if it doesn't work that way, try it another way. [But] there's not much leeway for doing that [due to the imposition of quantitative goals]' (*SRAC practitioner*).

It is essential for these teams to be committed to reflection, exploration and experimentation if they are to overcome the complex nature of practices and to adapt methods and tools to the unique nature of prior learning accreditation. The tensions referred to above, however, influence the thinking of CNO staff and the process by which methods and tools are adapted, as the following shows:

'We can change according to people's needs, we work with people, not with paper. As far as the methods are concerned, we always try

as hard as we can to adapt them to people, but we can't adapt them to everybody, we can't do that. We have targets to meet, we have to make sure people come to the Centre, we try to do the best we can' (SRAC practitioner).

The tension between respect for each person's specific circumstances, seeking to adapt methods and tools accordingly, and meeting targets is clear:

'If instead of having 300 people with certificates, which is this year's target, we only had 200, we'd have more time to analyse certain adults' cases and to think about what the best approach would really be [...] And that's where the system goes wrong [...]' (CNO coordinator).

Some CNO staff recognise how important it is to be able to adapt the process more closely to each adult's particular situation:

'I feel strongly with some people that I'd like the process to last longer so that I could feel more confident about the decision I take' (SRAC practitioner).

These comments reflect the complexity, concerns and dilemmas experienced by CNO staff, who have the difficult task of managing the tensions in the scheme and of trying to strike a balance between the different perspectives that influence it. Although interviewees said that they were worried about achieving the numerical goals, they regard the quality of the SRAC process to be the most important aspect since quality has a direct impact on the social visibility and credibility of these practices. The staff of the Centres studied favour a humanist approach and take the view that the process, besides awarding certificates, should allow personal development, which is reflected in the organisation and functioning of the scheme and in outcomes for adults. The adults interviewed often refer to the high demands of CNO staff and say that they are happy with the situation, since they understand that it has an impact on the social value of the certificate obtained, as is very clear in this comment: '*they gave us a certain responsibility, they made us realise that it's not just a matter of getting the certificate for the sake of it, most of all it's done with some dignity*' (adult awarded a certificate).

Mediation tools and tensions

The objective of mediation tools is to help to identify and describe life experience. These tools are geared towards explaining experiential learning, which is essential if adults' prior learning and its link with the reference framework skills are to be understood. In the three Centres under study, mediation tools have become increasingly important in assessing skills in the recognition stage and in obtaining the information required to justify the decision in the accreditation process. Their central position is evident in the power each Centre's staff have to plan and change these tools, and in the time set aside for completing them in the recognition stage.

The starting point for most mediation tools is the adults' life history and experience. In some of these tools, after describing the aspects of their life (what they have done, how they did it, what results they obtained), they have to provide evidence of the 'links' between their prior experiential learning and the reference framework skills. The tools focusing on the life path as a whole seek to capture the adults' experience as exhaustively as possible, and therefore require a retrospective description and reflection based in the present and, in some cases, looking towards the future. These tools boost self-recognition and allow adults to take ownership of their life paths, and take an approach geared towards personal development and emancipation.

Following a different rationale, the reference framework skills are the starting point for other mediation tools. In this case the adults identify the moments/situations/tasks in which they developed such skills on the basis of their life path. These tools make it easier to link their life history and the reference framework skills, though their completion requires greater detachment from and a greater capacity to reflect upon and analyse their experience.

Although the entry points are different, mediation tools that start from the life history as well as those that start from the reference framework skills seek to help adults to reflect on the skills they have acquired throughout life on the one hand, and to explain and take ownership of their experience on the other. Staff in the Centres under study obtain information with which to carry out the assessment from this detailed explanation of experience, which involves positioning the adult against the level of certification to be obtained.

This type of explanation of prior experiential learning and its comparison with reference framework skills offers potential in terms of self recognition, which the teams intentionally capitalise upon, as

can be seen from this comment: *'It's not enough for us to recognise their skills, they have to be the ones who recognise them and include them in their file'* (SRAC practitioner). Mediation tools are a *'stimulus for taking ownership of what is theirs'* (SRAC practitioner). They also help the adults involved, who are not very well educated, to internalise and understand the logic of the process, factors which are essential for motivating them and for enabling them to construct a narrative from their life experience.

Staff have two types of concern when reformulating and planning the mediation tools: they have to ensure, on the one hand, that they allow the individual to be involved in the task, which is why its completion has to be accessible and meaningful to them, and on the other they have to facilitate the staff's work in matching each adult's life experience with the reference framework skills. They must therefore capture their life experiences, i.e. their know-how and skills, as exhaustively and in as much detail as possible. Guaranteeing these two conditions in these tools as a whole is a difficult task, and particular tensions and dilemmas that have to be addressed sometimes arise and represent a constant challenge for CNO staff.

In many cases these dilemmas reflect the tensions caused by the coexistence of two theoretical strands in prior learning accreditation practices, and they are addressed by staff in the three Centres when they reformulate, plan and apply the tools. They are interlinked and the most evident are: complexity/simplicity, speed/quality, exhaustiveness/privacy, stability/change, individual/peer group and early/late selection.

In the complexity/simplicity dilemma, complexity on the one hand arises because there is a need to capture experiences and skills as exhaustively and in as much detail as possible, making the tools complex and difficult to complete, while simplicity on the other derives from the need to make completion of the tools accessible in order to allow the adults to be involved in the process and to allow them to take ownership of and reflect upon it.

The speed/quality dilemma is connected on the one hand with the need to ensure speed in completing the tools in order to comply with quantitative targets ⁽³⁾, and on the other with the need to ensure the quality, image and credibility of the process, the institution and the practitioners who work in the Centres.

⁽³⁾ The supervisory body establishes targets relating to the number of enrolments and adults certified; failure to meet the targets may have an impact on the financial appropriation awarded to the New Opportunity Centre concerned.

The exhaustiveness/privacy dilemma is related to the fact that the information must be guaranteed to be exhaustive so as to capture the entire life picture as fully as possible and to ensure that skills are meticulously identified. However, the more exhaustive the collection of information, the greater the risk that issues concerning each adult's privacy will arise, i.e. personal aspects relating to emotions and feelings, leading to situations which are difficult to manage in the recognition sessions.

The stability/change dilemma is related to the need to ensure the stability of the tools as a way of ensuring that the best use is made of the Centres' time and resources, and that targets are met. At the same time, however, they have to be reformulated constantly because the practitioners involved are concerned about the quality of the process and seek to make the most of their accumulated experience and critical reflection, and to adapt the process to the adults' particular circumstances.

The individual/peer group dilemma is related to the fact that, according to the type of tool to be completed and the profile of the adult undergoing the recognition process, it is sometimes considered more appropriate to provide individual personalised sessions. The shortage of human resources on the other hand, however, the need for the Centres to meet targets and the synergies generated by a peer group justify collective sessions.

The early/late selection dilemma arises because staff have to establish, as quickly as possible, whether the adults do or do not have the profile to obtain a certificate. Early selection is essential if the adults are not to be exposed to adverse situations. Early selection also involves risks, however, since in some cases the adults may be directed towards other opportunities because they are unable to demonstrate particular know-how and skills in their first meetings with staff in the Centres. This can arise when the adults underrate their know-how or do not understand the logic of the process, and therefore cannot produce information geared towards its aims. Establishing that an adult does not have the skills regarded as necessary to complete the process successfully, or realising on the other hand that, although they have such skills, they are unable to demonstrate them, is a difficult task. Late selection, meanwhile, provides a better basis for the decision when the adult has to be guided towards another type of opportunity. In this case the staff have already been able to collect more information. The longer the adult spends in the process, however, the greater the

risk that they will feel that recognition is being denied, with all the negative effects associated with that situation.

These dilemmas are addressed on a case-by-case basis according to the Centres' specific nature, the adults undergoing the process and the approach of staff. Points of balance, which have to be managed by staff both in terms of the planning and the application of the tools, nonetheless have to be found.

Conclusion

Prior learning accreditation practices are marked by complexity and tensions generated essentially by the two theoretical strands on which they are based, and the specific circumstances deriving from their underlying assumptions. This has a range of implications for the organisation and functioning of the schemes concerned, particularly the tools involved. Interviewees' comments highlight the presence and influence of two ideologies in the SRAC process delivered in the Centres: on the one hand, the humanist ideology that still currently moulds the specific features of the methods used, and on the other the ideology of individual responsibility geared towards human resources management and the meeting of policy targets defined at national and European level. Prior learning accreditation practices are based on innovative methods and are underpinned by a personal development perspective, but at the same time their purposes 'functionally subject those methods to the production of more individuals who are more competitive and who produce and consume more' (Canário, 2006, p. 45).

CNO staff responsible for prior learning accreditation practices thus face a paradox that is difficult to resolve and that may have consequences at several levels: i) a reduction in opportunities for staff to discuss and reflect upon the scheme, something the complexity and infancy of the process renders essential; ii) a decrease in the quality of the SRAC process in favour of the number of adults certified (e.g. decrease in enrolment standards, less investment in adapting methods and tools to the characteristics of the adults and the specific features of the process), which has a direct impact on the social credibility and acknowledgement of these practices; iii) an increase in the number of adults who abandon the process without obtaining a certificate, which may have personal consequences which are difficult to overcome, i.e. as regards self-esteem, self-

confidence and the relationship with knowledge in general and training in particular.

The complexity and tensions involved in these practices are addressed on a daily basis by CNO staff, and it is therefore essential for them to have an attitude of critical examination and experimentation and an enquiring mind. They must be aware of the complexity of SRAC practices and of their contribution to the construction of solutions consistent with the assumptions underlying them. The orientation of the methods and tools depends both on the aims of the schemes and on the aims assumed by the various staff members: *'the same tool can be applied in different ways, it depends on who's using it'* (CNO coordinator). This degree of independence gradually won by the staff makes it possible to exploit the potential and limit the risks involved in the SRAC process.

Contrary to what might be thought, the action of staff 'is not determined. Their narrow margin for manoeuvre can be broadened if their practice is accompanied by a clarity that allows it to be placed between instrumental reason and emancipating reason' (Canário, 2006, p. 46). However, at a time when the CNO network is expanding substantially, there is a risk that staff may neglect the importance of reflection, research and experimentation, aspects that require time and which are difficult to reconcile with pressures and competition between Centres.

The autonomy of the Centres is essential for constructing these new social practices, and this is the only way to ensure that staff commit themselves as reflective practitioners, 'capable of producing knowledge that comes from within their professional activity rather than applying procedures dictated by the tools and organisations that oversee them' (Canário, 2002, p. 23). The capacity for critical reflection of the various CNO staff members is extremely important for different reasons: i) the Centres are very recent, which means that their working methods and tools must be consolidated; ii) they function on the basis of a perspective of exploiting the skills of individuals, since they are located on the opposite side of the academic model, and in this case the critical attitude of staff is important for ensuring that the perspective of the SRAC process is not undermined. The process of innovation arising out of the reflective action of staff is essential for constructing new social practices which are complex. In this context the work of SRAC practitioners and trainers is crucial, and 'is constantly condemned to begin again, like the mythical hero Sisyphus' (Canário, 2002, p. 22).

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