Title: How action research in Second Chance Schools can help actors reflect on and develop an empowering approach at the university level

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Abstract :

In France, Second Chance Schools (E2C) accept young people between 18 and 25 years of age who have left the school system without qualifications. They seek the professional and social integration of these youth. The training proposed alternates between training in a centre and internship in a firm and lasts approximately seven months. Focus is placed on the recognition of the trainees' experience because E2Cs do not issue diplomas but rather concentrate on the validation of acquired skills. We will present and discuss the results of a recent action research approach undertaken following a call for projects by the French National Network of Second Chance Schools[1]. The network sought support for the implementation of a competence-based approach and focused on how action research would impact the training courses proposed by training specialists at the university level. Indeed, while the training of the trainers responsible for supporting these youth is a concern of the E2C network, this training also falls within the broader issue of the professionalisation of activities, approaches and professionals in charge of those at risk of social exclusion. How can this research lead to the re-examination of the models of "the training of the transformative trainer" (Eneau et al., 2019) proposed in these university training courses? How can one (re) think the dialogical spaces between research (the E2C action research in this case) and the training of the actors of professional insertion and training at the university?

Chapter :

In France, Second Chance Schools (E2C) accept young people between 18 and 25 years of age, who have left the school system without qualifications. They seek the professional and social integration of these young people. A European initiative, E2Cs were created following the publishing of the White Paper "Teaching and learning: towards the learning society", presented by Edith Cresson, European Commissioner for Research, Education and Training, in 1995. The first E2C was implemented in the French town of Marseille in 1997. Today, there are 51 schools spread across 118 sites. Since 2004, these schools have been in a network (the Second Chance Schools Network). Their teaching approach is based on the Charter of Fundamental Principles of the E2C Network, which states that the training is aimed not at certification but rather at the accreditation of skills.

The training proposed alternates between training in a centre and internship in a firm and lasts approximately seven months. Focus is placed on the recognition of the trainees' experience and the development of a professional project. We will present and discuss the results of a recent action research approach undertaken following a call for projects by the French National Network of

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1   Action research undertaken by the mixed research laboratory (LISEC, University of Lorraine) that brings together researchers from the education and communication studies field: Nathalie Lavielle-Gutnik, Isabelle Houot, Hugues Lenoir & Maël Loquais

Second Chance Schools[2] about a support for the implementation of a competence-based approach. This contribution is focused on how action research would impact the training courses proposed by training specialists at the university level. It also sought to focus on how the university may support transformations in the field of training. Indeed, while the training of the trainers responsible for supporting these youth is a concern of the E2C network, this training also falls within the broader issue of the professionalisation of activities, approaches and professionals in charge of those at risk of social exclusion.

How can this research lead to the re-examination of the models of "the training of the transformative trainer" (Eneau et al., 2019) proposed in these university training courses? How can one (re) think the dialogical spaces between research (the E2C action research in this case) and the training of the actors of professional insertion and training at the university?

First, we will present the context in which the action research was carried out from 2016 to 2019 as well as our methodology centred on the co-creation of knowledge and the transformations in play during the implementation phase of a competence-based approach. Second, we will discuss four key issues that emerge from our findings as these may help re-examine the role universities may play in the training of the "Second Chance School" trainers.

1. The context of the CBA E2C action research

Sponsored by the National Network of Second Chance Schools, the action research presented here was intended to support E2Cs in implementing a competence-based approach (CPA). In 2015, seeking to consolidate the specificity of E2C pedagogy, and based on the observation that the actual training frameworks no longer met the needs of trainees and teams, the E2C network launched a national call for proposals to undertake research action that would help to support the implementation of a competence-based approach centred around two objectives:
- first, the research would "provide schools with clear principles defining the training objectives of trainees, induce pedagogical approaches and tools specific to the competency-based approach, and propose evaluation tools and approaches resulting from this approach";
- second, it would "strengthen the educational identity of the E2C Network, establish a common culture, and give itself the means to disseminate this identity and culture in order to present and reinforce the E2C label".
The Work Activity and Professional Identity (WAPI) team of the Lisec Laboratory (Inter-University Laboratory in Education and Communication Sciences) was selected to carry out this action research. The approach involved building the framework of an *ad hoc* competence-based approach, a framework capable of building on existing practices to support the transformations under way. This action research revolved around three phases:
- The first involved 10 experiments conducted across 10 sites, geographically dispersed throughout France and involving more than 60 trainers. Working groups were set up within the teams to design and implement training sessions while questioning the practices adopted thus far.
- The second phase involved the creation of a common framework for teaching practices in E2Cs. A working group brought together the trainers who had participated in the experiments in order to create a document that would look into the principles of the teaching activities in E2C, analyse how the existing frameworks were used and develop a new competency framework. This document was formalised in January 2018: it guides the use of the E2C competency framework. At the same time, 20 individual and collective interviews were conducted by the training teams and researchers.

- The third phase involved the development of a training plan and extending the E2C competency-based approach to all staff members in the 118 schools.

The various phases of the action research required close cooperation between research teams, representatives of the E2C Network, institutional managers and trainers. However, the collaborative dimension of this action research questions the university's role with regard to both the research dimension and the training of trainers.

2. Action research and adult education at the university

Research action around the implementation of a competency-based approach provided an opportunity to question the foundations of the pedagogical approach proposed in Second Chance Schools. The problems the trainers encountered while making choices to determine an empowerment approach, with a view to making participants autonomous, revealed the tension between the emancipation process and the risk of normalisation. This brings us back to some of the major issues that emerged from the working groups during this action research. The specificity of the support provided in E2Cs illustrates issues that can be expressed around four main lines:
- do E2Cs enrol a "specific" public?
- does one's professional project in the E2C context receive specific support?
- how is the connection between experience and competence conceived?
- what about the specificity of an approach based on the conception of an individual as a capable subject?

2.1. Second-chance trajectories... specific nature of trainees?

This action research first highlights the importance of how the trainees on a second-chance professional path are perceived. Interviews show that young participants are often perceived by trainers as "lacking" (in certificates, skills, projects, motivation, know-how, etc.). Although it is known that their paths are socially determined and are particularly affected by their family situation (parents' socio-professional category and level of education) and by their previous academic career (Loquais, 2016, 2018), there is a risk of the pathologisation of trajectories, as the interview excerpt below shows:

> *"Most young people say you really kind of saved us sometimes. I hear words like that because we've healed something. I don't know what we've healed, it's not necessarily an illness but we've cured something, so there's something wrong somewhere. When the young person arrived, there was something lacking and here we healed something and we should ask questions [and] conduct a study, so it may actually be the lack of skills". (E2C trainer).*

The question of the specificity of the trainees accepted in Second-Chance Schools is all the more relevant because the criteria for accessing this type of training largely revolve around "the lack of" something: lack of diploma, for example, or being jobless at the time of recruitment in an E2C. This raises the question about a possible semantic shift between integration policies put in place to support the most precarious situations, on the one hand, and on the other, the characterisation of target audiences focused on deficits. In addition to the risk of stigmatisation, this type of "deficit" (Frétigné, 2012) and "psychologising" (Divay, 2008) approach brings up the problem of the knowledge and recognition of those actually admitted to this type of structure. Is it a question of perceiving these people in terms of what they are considered to be lacking with regard to the expected standards, or is it about creating the conditions for a possible encounter that involves

reciprocal knowledge exchange and the renewal of knowledge through a remediation mechanism such as E2C?

As such, the issue of the "level" of those with "low-level qualifications" has sparked much debate between trainers, managers and researchers. The trainers have reported tension between the "low level" of the trainees admitted, perceived as a hindrance to their engagement in training, the need to take into account the skills acquired prior to training and the Second Chance programme's objectives for each participant, aimed at empowerment[3]. However, within the framework of the E2C CBA, the level of education has gradually taken a back seat and been replaced by the empowerment of trainees, which is now the central issue. This means that there is a need to revisit the support mechanisms in place, notably with regard to the career project.

The Second Chance project... a specific approach to supporting trainees' projects?

The project can be the mirror through which these young people are perceived when they are considered to be "without a project" (Boutinet, 1990). However, supporting professional projects is a major aspect of the support process implemented by Second Chance Schools. The paradox of the project can thus be expressed in these terms: because of the precariousness of their actual situation, the young people enrolled in this type of structure are often practically incapable of projecting themselves into a future project. However, the so-called "struggling" public is largely expected to act as a guarantor of a professional project and of this part of the attempt to make the autonomous individuals accountable for the conduct of their career path. This puts the trainers in a difficult situation as the activities they choose are expected to empower trainees and help them demonstrate their employability. These demands shift the weight of the responsibility of one's professional future on to the individual. Supporting professional projects is even more problematic because successful professional integration is not necessarily pre-built, but rather is the result of transactions developed by chance, encounters, opportunities, etc. Put differently, professional integration does not necessarily require one to have a pre-existing project. To relive this tension, trainers have focused on autonomy in the training programme: must trainees be autonomous in their choices and in what they learn from the outset, or can autonomy be considered more as a process? The E2C CBA approach considers training as an empowerment process. It is less a question of expecting trainees to become self-reliant before they can learn and more about producing the conditions that allow them to change and to put their professional and personal aspirations into words. In other words, within the framework of the E2C CPA, the autonomy of trainees is a target rather than a prerequisite: increasing the autonomy of the trainees requires specific conditions and support. In this sense, the empowering dimension of the project depends on how it is implemented in the young person's experience of doing and learning in E2Cs:

"It is through the experience of doing and learning that the young people obtain points of reference which may enable them to act as responsible and autonomous people, but to do so, this experience must be "deliberate", i.e., reflected individually upon (what is the significance, meaning, value of this experience for me?), but also focused on others (how do others perceive the value I myself place on my lived experience?) (Lavielle-Gutnik, N., Houot, I., 2018).

Skills: the tree that hides experiences in E2Cs?

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3   "We'll take the case of a learner who has a very low level and, for example, the trainer will say: 'Well, I can't work on anything in the framework with her, what can we do?' You see? Based on that, we can perhaps actually look at the framework, maybe we can use a project to ensure that projects are validated because we can add skills or activities [or] tasks". (French trainer)

While experience plays a central role in andragogic models, its consideration in E2C training was the high point of the debates that emerged *in* and *through* our action research. To a certain extent, the objective was to clarify the tension between "*the will to respect the social norm (clarify the training framework, convincingly present a CV, adopt the expected behaviours with regard to employability, show, or even prove, that one acts in accordance with the expectations of the recruiter) and the need to take into account the singularity of experience in its dimension of subjective experience*" (Chauvet, 2018, 27). To this end, the assessments conducted at the end of the internships tended to be considered as situations enabling the validation of skills. However, feedback on trainees' experiences was ultimately at the heart of the trainers' support activities: it was this approach that the E2C CBA sought to formalise. The action research shed light on the dynamics between the expected skills and the conditions that promote the development of those skills. A working group was thus set up to clarify the dynamics around the use of E2C frameworks. The objectives of this working group were twofold: first, it was expected to develop a new competency framework that would formalise what one had the right to expect, in terms of activity, from a young person who had completed the E2C training. Second, the action research focused on how the training framework was used and clarified the role played by the "horizon of expectations" (Houot, Triby, 2017) of such a tool. This implies that both trainees and training teams must take ownership of the tool. Lastly, the centrality of the experience in the CBA approach implies starting from the singular experience of each trainee and building empowering situations through which young people can become aware of their achievements (Freire, 1977).

The construction of an approach based on the conception of the subject as being capable

Rather than adopting a deficit-based view of young people, and focusing on their academic level from the outset, the E2C CBA approach perceives subjects as "capable of learning and developing their potential provided that they are placed in favourable situations" (E2C Network, 2018). The facilitator's attitude is one of the conditions that makes it possible to implement this premise: it is less a question of transmitting knowledge than of supporting the socio-professional development of trainees. Rather than considering that trainees alone are responsible for the management of their training courses, emphasis is placed on supporting them to help them to develop and to become aware of their achievements in order to enable them to be more autonomous after the training. The perception of trainees as capable subjects places them as the actors and authors of their training. Specifically, this means that there is a need to create spaces to discuss and compare different points of view around the objectives of the training (co-construction of training objectives as part of an individualised course) and the training modalities of the course (choice of internships, etc.). This assumption is not without consequences for the prospects of empowerment that emerged following the meeting between the actors on the ground (i.e., the School of the Second Chance) and the researchers, from the perspective of "joint support (...) from a critical and transformative perspective" (Bertrand, Eneau - al., 2019).

In conclusion: what is the university's role in the training of "second chance" trainers?

Repositioning the support approach of E2Cs calls into question the university's role in the training of trainers and, more broadly, in its mission to support ongoing transformations. While the quest for empowerment now lies at the heart of the E2C CBA, it questions the position of researchers who are involved both as researchers in this type of field and as lecturers in the field of adult training (Degree and Master programmes). Two aspects are worth mentioning here: action research as a formative space and action research as a space for the co-construction of knowledge. Throughout the action research, it emerged that the E2C trainers *perceived action research as a formative space*. For instance, during individual and group interviews or working meetings, trainers asked questions or requested references. Several trainers spoke of their plans to resume studies and one of them enrolled in a doctoral programme. The trainer profiles were highly heterogeneous and only a few of

them had obtained a Master's degree. Moreover, group meetings, individual or collective interviews, experiments and meetings between different training sites all provided spaces which helped in the training and professionalisation of E2C trainers. Action research also provided a space for the co-production of knowledge enabling both trainers and researchers to draw on the knowledge produced and thus mutually enhance their own knowledge. The social utility of such an experiment is twofold: first, there was collaborative knowledge construction after a long negotiation process involving trainers, managers and researchers. This led to the actual transformation of the identity of the E2C education project through two key elements: the production of a new framework as a common goal and the formalisation of a CBA centred on a philosophy of empowerment. Second, there was the production of knowledge that can be re-used in adult training courses and by E2C trainers in particular. The "double hermeneutic" (Giddens, 2012), relating to how knowledge is negotiated, is empowering not only for actors such as E2Cs, but also for researchers and the university and it allows, through the space it provides for mediation and action research, effective transformations targeting empowerment.

This research invites further reflection on the "transformative support approaches", vectors of "joint transformations" (Bertrand, Eneau & al., 2019). For example, the model proposed by the University of Rennes 2 as part of the Master's degree course in "*Stratégie et Ingénierie de Formation des Adultes*" (SIFA) (Strategies and Approaches in Adult Training), or as part of the "Training Professions[4]" course at the University of Lorraine, draws on principles based on back-and-forth exchanges between research and teaching. From an educational perspective, it is a question of supporting the reflective practitioner in the different work, training and problematisation spaces. This therefore involves thinking about training approaches from a critical perspective and from a perspective of Training - Action - Research for empowerment. The approaches *for* and *through* research for the courses mentioned above are based on the "joint production of knowledge" (Ibid.) via spaces promoting dialogue and mediation. In view of the transformations observed in the E2C action research, it may be assumed that this type of approach not only produces effects at the level of the learner, but also has the potential to transform training and integration structures, professional environments and "second chance" policies in the broadest sense.

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