

## Popular education in an association – expert by experience and work in tandem

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### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to analyse the dynamics of popular education in the Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude focusing on the expert by experience and the work in tandem. The expert by experience is someone who has personal life experience of poverty and social exclusion and who has also undergone specific training in these areas. The work in tandem is a work methodology involving two individuals and grounded on the complementarity of knowledge. The empirical data was collected using participatory action research. In conceptual terms, the paper is framed by critical theory and popular education.. The research findings point to diversified and continuing popular education dynamics in the initiatives of this association, managed by residents in several interdependent areas (social, cultural, urbanistic, educational, etc) across a long time period. Its practices are geared towards emancipation and the construction of a more just world, with less inequality. Popular education has contributed both to the qualification and the promotion of the power to act of the experts by experience who take action in the neighbourhood, in tandem, in various areas of intervention.*

**Keywords:** popular education, work in tandem, expert by experience, association

ISSN 2000-7426

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<http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.4209>

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse the dynamics of popular education in the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude*, focusing essentially on the expert by experience and work in tandem. The expert by experience is someone who has lived experience of poverty and social exclusion, has undertaken specific training on the (re)elaboration of that experience and the recognition and validation of experiential knowledge, and who works in tandem with an academic expert in that area of intervention. The ‘work in tandem’ consists of a work and/or training methodology between two people who share their knowledge and mutually support each other, thus establishing a reciprocal and horizontal relationship based on autonomy and self-management (Cappellini & Zhang, 2013; Cavaco, 2018; Eschenauer, 2013). In the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude*, the work in tandem work is performed by a duo consisting of the expert by experience and the academic expert. The Association is located in the neighbourhood of *Cova da Moura*, in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, a context characterised by poverty, migration, low educational attainment, but also by cultural diversity and solidarity.

In contemporary society, owing to the complexity of social phenomena, when seeking to promote the suitability of the intervention, human dignity and social change, the expert by experience gains prominence (Godinot, 2014). The ethical principle of involving individuals in situations of poverty and social exclusion in measures that impact their lives, education, training and well-being is duly safeguarded throughout these processes. The academic expert is an individual holding a certificate or diploma that attests to his/her training in a specific area of scientific knowledge (for example, Educator, Teacher, Sociologist, Social Worker, Psychologist, Police Officer)

The analysis is based on empirical data collected by means of a participatory action research approach. It sought to understand the history and dynamics of the neighbourhood and the Association, the training and professional profile of the expert by experience and the methodology of the work in tandem. The purpose of the research was twofold: to produce scientific knowledge on these themes and intervene in this field. The aim of this approach was to ensure coherence with the dynamics of the popular education under study and to assume the researcher’s commitment to ‘social change’ (Freire, 1972, 2000).

The intervention essentially entailed two dimensions: accompaniment and formation of a tandem, consisting of the expert by experience and the academic expert; support in the preparation and presentation of the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion reference framework to the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education (ANQEP). ANQEP is the public entity responsible for the National Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Catalogue. In this study, a section of the research focusing on the history and dynamics of the neighbourhood and the Association, the training of the expert by experience and the work in tandem is presented.

The participatory action research consisted of engaging in educational practices, with a view to producing scientific knowledge and contributing to social change in a popular neighbourhood (Fals Borda, 2015). The research conducted was based on the transversal relationships among all the actors on mutual recognition and the interdependence of knowledge given ‘the creative potential of breaking up the asymmetry’, and the importance of bringing together academic and popular knowledge’ (Fals Borda, 2020, p. 195). The researcher collected the data and immersed herself in the reality, ‘not only through observation, but also through her work with the subjects’ (Fals Borda, 2015, p. 235).

In conceptual terms, popular education is considered as a critical practice and theory of education and society, based on processes organised by and with popular groups, from a perspective of ‘problematizing education’ and ‘conscientization’ (Freire, 1972). By assuming the political nature of the act of educating, popular education strives for emancipation and the construction of a more just world, with less inequality and oppression.

The theoretical framework underpinning popular education, the methodology, namely aspects regarding participatory action research and the procedures adopted, will be presented in the next section. A description of the history and dynamics of the neighbourhood, as well as the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude* will then be provided.

## Popular education – specific characteristics

Popular education is characterised by diverse currents of thought, movements and actors (Chevalier & Deschamps, 2019; Crowther, 2013). Historically, it is associated with politically charged disputes and social practices (Assumpção et al., 2009). Simultaneously, popular education is a field of social practices and ‘a theoretical paradigm’ (Gadotti & Torres, 2003, p. 14). Thus, it has come to configure itself as a political and pedagogical alternative to the established educational projects that are detached from the interests of popular communities.

As a social practice, popular education stems from human action when it takes on the characteristics of a struggle for the rights of economically disadvantaged communities, substantiated in autonomy, self-management, and emancipation processes. From an educational point of view, these practices aim to develop important skills for survival and citizenship within the most disadvantaged social classes, with the purpose of improving their quality of life and challenging the social and political order (Torres, 2003). As a theoretical dimension, popular education developed mainly from the 1960s onwards (Steele, 2020), in line with the thought of critical theory authors concerned with social inequality, advocating the emancipation of the most oppressed social classes and social transformation. These authors, such as Canário (2007), Freire (1967, 1972) Illich (1985) and Melo (2012), assume a broad perspective on educational processes.

Popular education initiatives have evolved in accordance with the historical, social, economic and cultural context of countries however, several common, cross-cutting features are observable: the political nature, the collective and often self-managed dimension, recognition of the experience and knowledge of the popular communities, and the dialectic relationship between thought and action.

The political dimension is associated with popular communities’ critical awareness of reality and the promotion of change through processes that combine action-reflection-action (Assumpção et al., 2009; Torres, 2003). Popular education is intrinsically linked to the needs and interests of poorer individuals. It is critical of the status quo and strives for social and political change (Crowther, 2013), moving away from the dominant social and educational practices in terms of contents, processes, outcomes, and relationships (Foley, 2001).

Popular education stems from the emergence of collective and frequently self-managed practices among popular communities (Melo, 2012). Popular communities are spaces inhabited predominantly by working class individuals with low levels of schooling and personal experiences of poverty whose basic rights are frequently neglected. This organisation arises from an individual and collective position-taking towards everyday problems, in an attempt to transform the existing social reality. It is argued that the

organisation of individuals generates ‘collective consciousness in the sense of believing in themselves, of serving as an example to others’ (Gohn, 2009, p. 41), giving rise to participation, citizenship and social movements. Popular education consists of collective dynamics in defence of freedom and equality, in an attempt to promote quality of life in the most disadvantaged locations (Chevalier & Deschamps, 2019), inhabited by popular communities, thus ensuring their ‘right to the city’ (Wildemeersch & Lages, 2018). Hence, they contribute to ‘learning to exercise democracy’ (Canário, 2007, p. 14).

By acknowledging that individuals are bearers of knowledge, popular education favours the production of knowledge over its transmission (Gadotti & Torres, 2003). The recognition of experiential knowledge fosters the attribution of meaning and the appropriation of lived experience, which contributes to the critical analysis of the reality, awareness and promotion of the ‘power to act’ (Ricœur, 2005). Thus, by attributing importance to citizens’ life experience ‘they are led to assume themselves as social, historical, and cultural subjects of the act of knowing’ (Oliveira, 1997, p. 11).

The dialectic relationship between theory and practice is an essential dimension of popular education (Chevalier & Deschamps, 2019). It involves an incessant movement between grounded critical reflection and transformative action, which highlights the importance of the ‘ecology of knowledge’ (Santos, 2007). According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), ecology of knowledge is based on the recognition of the plurality and interdependence of heterogeneous knowledge beyond scientific knowledge. This is achieved through processes that attribute value both to popular communities’ life experience and their access to scientific knowledge, but also acknowledge their urge and ability to transform reality. Popular education is ‘a facilitator of the scientific understanding that groups and movements can and should have with regard to their experiences’ (Freire, 2000, p. 29).

Critical collective consciousness is worked on in popular education with a view to fostering the development of responsible civic participation, contributing to a reduction of individuals in poverty, stimulating rural and community development, and collaboration in the democratisation of access and educational success (Melo, 2012). Moreover, it can enable the discussion and visibility of complex social problems, often rendered natural or made invisible, through the implementation of new social and educational practices, as well as the emergence of ‘emancipatory vocabulary and instruments, for the invention of new citizenships’ (Santos & Nunes, 2003, p. 26).

## Methodology

### *Participatory action research*

The empirical data underlying the analysis resulted from participatory action research conducted in the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude* over a period of one year. Participatory action research ‘may be defined as a method of study and action that goes hand in hand with an altruistic philosophy of life to obtain useful and reliable results in the improvement of collective situations, above all, in relation to grassroots communities’ (Fals Borda, 2020, p. 206). From a historical point of view, this type of research is critical of the hegemonic development model, studies and stimulates integrated, endogenous and sustainable practices in territories characterised by situations of poverty and oppression (Fals Borda, 2020; Finger & Asún, 2003; Hall, 1975).

The adoption of this research approach was deemed most appropriate due to the characteristics of the context and the interests of the actors involved - the researcher, the leaders of the Association and of the Tomkiewicz Centre, the expert by experience and

the academic expert. The actors sought to simultaneously combine the construction of scientific knowledge and transformative intervention regarding the social and educational practices promoted by the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude*.

Participatory action research acknowledges the complexity of social and educational phenomena, and the importance of studying that which is concealed and silenced, from a social and scientific perspective. This type of research falls within the epistemologies of the South, as an ‘insurgent, resistant’ (Santos et al., 2016, p. 17) and alternative proposal, given the hegemonic ways of understanding the world. To the extent possible, this study sought to adopt an approach grounded on horizontal and sharing relationships that enhance the power to act of the actors involved, based on the assumption that ‘research is a communicative interaction in which there is a process of dialogue and mutual learning and trust between the researcher and the researched’ (Fals Borda, 2020, p. 197). Despite the complexity of this process, the actors involved participated ‘in formulating the problem, discussing the solutions and interpreting the data’ (Hall, 1975, p. 29).

The research emerged as a result of an interest expressed by: i) the researcher in becoming acquainted with the work in tandem and the training of the expert by experience; ii) an expert by experience in being accompanied and developing knowledge on the biographical approach and portfolio; iii) the directors of the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude*, the Tomkiewicz Centre and the academic expert due to the importance they attributed to the support of the researcher in the accompaniment of the work in tandem and in the preparation of the reference framework of training, recognition and validation of prior learning of the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion. The combination of these interests gave rise to the development of research that sought to be a significant and (trans)formative experience for all those involved, from a perspective of committed action with social change (Fals Borda, 2020).

### *Techniques and procedures*

Due to the characteristics of participatory action research, the data collection process was concomitant with periods of dialogue, reflection, sharing and learning among the actors involved. The empirical data underpinning the analysis was collected over a one-year period, via the following methods: observation-immersion, biography workshop, semi-structured interviews, document collection and informal conversations. Observation-immersion occurred in monthly meetings with the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude* team and with members of the Tomkiewicz Centre (advisory board of the Association). These meetings served for the actors to take stock of the Association’s activity, to programme interventions and define strategies for action. The various actors’ immersion in the research context and their reflective and collaborative processes fostered the production of empirical data that are key not only to the research but also to change, striving to ensure ‘a complete inner vision of the situations and processes under study, with goals for present and future action’ (Fals Borda, 2015, p. 235).

A monthly biography workshop was organised with the researcher and a tandem. The tandem consisted of a pair, namely the expert by experience and the academic expert. The objective was to gain further understanding of the training process and experiential knowledge of the expert by experience, the methodology of the work in tandem and to promote the training and accompaniment of the tandem. The biography workshop focused on ‘the construction and appropriation of the training history trajectory’ (Delory-Momberger, 2014, p. 169), and of the professional trajectory of the two tandem members.

The biography workshop consisted of reflection, explanation, socialization and analysis in relation to: i) significant points of the training process of the expert by

experience and the academic expert; ii) characteristics, specific features, challenges and learning outcomes of the work in tandem; iii) training process and professional profile of the expert by experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with one of the founders and a professional from the Association, the excerpts of which are identified in the presentation of the data with the acronyms ENT1 and ENT2, respectively. During this period, several informal conversations were held and working documents were collected, especially those related to the history of the neighbourhood and the Association, and to the training of the expert by experience.

The participatory action research followed the ethical principles of research in the field of Education Sciences (All European Academies, 2017; Sociedade Portuguesa de Ciências da Educação, 2020), guided by relationships based on dialogue, listening, trust and mutual recognition among all the participants. These ethical principles were also structuring in epistemological terms since, in order to promote the participation and co-construction of the research, it was essential to ensure horizontal relationships based on respect, recognition of the experience and knowledge of others, and their ability to act.

The empirical data collected in the research underwent a thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2018) based on the analytical categories arising from the general and specific objectives. This analysis was initially conducted by the researcher and later improved with the support of the other actors. The selection presented in this paper focused on the following analytical categories: i) history and dynamics of the neighbourhood; ii) history and dynamics of the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude*; iii) characteristics and challenges of the work in tandem methodology; iv) history, characteristics and challenges of the training of educational assistants and the expert by experience. The empirical data resulting from the ‘methodological triangulation’ (Thurmond, 2001, p.254) of the aforementioned techniques is presented below.

## The neighbourhood, the association and popular education

### *The neighbourhood – the emergence of a collective life*

The Cova da Moura neighbourhood was built by migrants on abandoned land consisting of private (80%) and public (20%) property, in the municipality of Amadora, Portugal. These migrants were from rural areas of Portugal and Portuguese-speaking African Countries (PALOP), namely Cape Verde, Angola and Guinea-Bissau. From 1978 onwards, the progressive growth of the neighbourhood, through the construction of self-built houses by the residents themselves, led to several collective problems related to basic sanitation and urban planning. The neighbourhood needed essential infrastructures to enhance the population’s quality of life. Due to its precarious living conditions, but also to the influence of the different cultures that characterize it, community life in this territory has been guided by the metaphor ‘Djunta Mô’, a Cape Verdean expression meaning to join hands, solidarity, mutual aid and synergy, in the sense of together we are stronger.

Since the late 1970s, the residents have taken collective measures to solve some of the neighbourhood’s problems and also to demand the intervention of the state in areas within its competence. They have collectively taken control of various interventions in the neighbourhood: cleaning and paving the streets, collecting rubbish; planning, building and managing green spaces; constructing buildings of an associative nature themselves, determining the type of use of collective spaces in the neighbourhood, participating in the identification of problems, potential and solutions; and organising and managing the cultural practices. The residents have taken it upon themselves to demand electricity and

basic sanitation infrastructures in the neighbourhood (water, sewage, rubbish collection and the cleaning of the streets) from the relevant public authorities.

Three collective initiatives are particularly noteworthy: i) the creation of a women's group to claim the right to piped water in the neighbourhood houses; ii) the sharing of a resident couple's personal library within the community, so that children, youths and adults of the neighbourhood can have access to books and thus develop reading habits; iii) the residents' opposition and complaint activities against the public authorities' intention to demolish the houses, destroy the neighbourhood and resettle the residents in areas further away from the city centre. Over the last fifty years, the history of the neighbourhood has been interwoven with the collective demonstrations and fights of the residents against the political power for the right to the neighbourhood space and housing in decent conditions. Throughout this period, the residents have established and improved the neighbourhood's living conditions, constructing it as a place of community life, of belonging, memories and identities.

### *The Association - the emergence of critical and counter-hegemonic practices*

The *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude* began to structure itself in 1984 and was officially established in 1987 as a result of the collective mobilisation experience and the need to ensure the continuity and consistency of the residents' political intervention. The Association is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, located in the Cova da Moura neighbourhood and created by the residents. Initially, only the residents were part of the social bodies, however, at a later stage, outside individuals were also integrated, from a work in tandem perspective. The work of the Association is based- on collective processes, geared towards the participation of the residents and recognition of their experiences, knowledge and skills, as stated by the interviewee: 'it's the result of the skills of the people in the neighbourhood, they are the ones who built the Association' (ENT1). This dynamic is explained below.

The Association promotes global and sustainable community development, geared towards improving the living conditions of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, through the organisation of activities of a social, educational, cultural, sports, professional, economic, legal and urban character. The Association's intervention assumes a political dimension: first, since its action is based on a model of integrated and sustainable local and community development; second, as it aims to ensure the survival of the neighbourhood in the territory where it was built, defying demolition attempts on the part of public entities; third, since improved neighbourhood conditions are promoted and claimed to ensure the residents' 'right to the city'. The work of the Association is inseparable from the social phenomena of colonialism, migration and racism.

The Association's intervention is anchored on a set of pillars established collectively by the managing bodies, who worked in the Association and lived in the neighbourhood in the early 1990s, through a progressive process: interculturality, communication, joy, gender equality, respect for beliefs, cooperation, empowerment, environment, creativity, persistence, quality, efficiency and effectiveness, and solidarity. These pillars are at the root of the work with the neighbourhood residents and are clearly apparent in the initiatives of the adult vocational training promoted by the Association:

We always work on the pillars, at the beginning, on the first day of the course; normally there are twelve people on the course, each one is responsible for a pillar to then move on to action and stimulate the others to take it into account. (ENT1)

The example denotes the importance attributed by the Association to the dialectic relationship between theory and practice as it strives for the accomplishment of its guiding principles on a daily basis, through its actions and the actions of the residents. Its goals, organisation and functioning, work methodologies and choice of lexicon shed light upon the organisational culture of the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude*, while this ‘form of functioning has had and continues to have implications for the work of the Association’ (ENT1).

Over the last three decades, the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude* has promoted highly diverse social and cultural practices with educational potential within the community, involving families, children, young people, adults and older adults. The Association has implemented various community initiatives in the neighbourhood, such as: the participatory citizenship project with older adults, focusing on literacy, culture, civic participation and health education; the neighbourhood mothers’ project, aimed at the mentoring and support of very poor families in the neighbourhood in terms of financial and family management. Other initiatives include school support for children, support for the professional integration of adults, a project to support victims of domestic violence, a project for the prevention and treatment of alcoholism, and the Kova M Studio project, which stimulates the musical production of young people from the neighbourhood. These initiatives are implemented by means of work in tandem and characterised by articulation, complementarity, accompaniment and synergies between the academic and the expert by experience professionals.

The aforementioned projects arose from the community’s own reflections and requests: i) for diagnostic purposes, with door to door surveys, to ascertain the residents’ concerns, satisfaction and what they would wish to change in the neighbourhood and their contributions to that change; ii) when the people themselves, in their daily lives, go to the Association and present proposals; iii) when the professionals observe and talk to the residents, etc.

### ***Training of the educational action assistants and the expert by experience***

Considering the diversity and complexity of the practices implemented by the Association, it was decided that particular emphasis would be placed on intervention in the fields of adult training and professional activity, more specifically on the expert by experience and work in tandem. Intervention in these domains is interdependent and arose from the interests, needs and experiences of the neighbourhood residents. The collective dimension that characterises the neighbourhood and the running of the Association has come to be reflected in the intentional and systematic education and training processes, implemented through resident participation in the diagnosis of problems and the identification of measures, as may be seen in the following excerpt:

[...] in the early 1990s, we introduced vocational training courses, because the women themselves said they needed support, needed to reflect better, to have training [...] the actual structuring of the courses was carried out together with these people who had been collaborating since the 1980s, here in the *Moinho*. (ENT1)

The Association’s intervention in the field of adult training has been guided by the singularity and pioneering nature of the training themes, frameworks and work methodologies. The initiatives implemented around vocational training over the last three decades have contributed to increase the academic and vocational qualifications of the neighbourhood residents, but also to the emergence of a terminology that defines the



unique quality of the Association's work, such as the terms: expert by experience, academic expert and work in tandem.

The training of the expert by experience focuses on two domains: poverty and being a colonized migrant. This training is intrinsically linked to the history of the neighbourhood residents and to the Association itself, as may be observed: 'this expert by experience figure is highly connected to the history of the *Moinho*' (ENT1). The initiatives behind the training of educational action assistants and experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion are driven by the Association and interdependent on the work in tandem. The initiatives of the residents and the Association occur in a continuous and interconnected movement. The experience in the training of educational assistants has proven to be crucial for the subsequent development of the training of the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion.

Within the scope of social intervention projects funded by the European Union, in partnership with actors from various member states, the Association promoted the conceptualisation reference framework of training for level II and III educational action assistants, and fostered the training of those working with children in the neighbourhood (in the nursery, kindergarten and with nannies). These projects, which were run between the late 1980s and 1990s, emerged when the leaders and workers of the Association realised: i) the importance of training for professionals working with children; ii) the importance of the knowledge resulting from these workers' experience; iii) since they did not hold a professional qualification in the field, the skills of these workers were not officially recognised. This was highlighted as follows: 'the illegal nannies already had these skills but they were not recognised' (ENT1).

When, in collaboration with the partners, the Association conceptualised the reference framework and promoted the training, concern about the professional qualification of educational assistants had not emerged in Portugal. The reference framework was organised into thematic modules on child development, working in partnership with parents and peers, and the organisation of resources. The curricular plan of the course had three complementary components: i) recognition and validation of experiential knowledge; ii) general and qualifying training in the area of early childhood education; iii) on-the-job training. The training consisted of the preparation of a portfolio on a computer, based on a biographical work on the explanation and recognition of knowledge and skills in the field of early childhood education. In the Association's working document, entitled Instrument for the Validation and Certification of the Informal Competences of Educational Action Employees, the perspective adopted is underlined: 'the competences acquired through informal channels may be presented and will be valued' (1988, §8). The recognition and validation of experiential knowledge allowed for the appropriation and recognition of the experience, knowledge and training power of the workers involved, as observed in the statement of one interviewee: 'after all I know how to do things [as claimed by the trainees]. The recognition that they knew a lot of things has been very important' (ENT1). The lived and experiential knowledge of the trainees were the main training resources.

In this training initiative, a dialectic relationship between practice and theory was promoted, as emphasised: '[We tried our best to] avoid the opposition between theory and practice. We give great priority to action, practice and on-the-job training' (ENT2). In this regard, the aim of the pedagogical work was to establish a process of knowledge construction 'in a spiral' (ENT1). Subsequently, the reference framework for training conceptualised by the Association was used by the public body that oversees adult education in Portugal as the basis for the design of Adult Education and Training Courses

for educational assistants and for the recognition, validation and certification of competences process in this professional area.

Since 2004, the Association has invested in the conceptualisation reference framework for training of the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion and in the implementation of this training, within the scope of several EU funded projects, in partnership with entities from European Union countries. Prior experience and the guidelines of the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude* found resonance in the work developed by its partners. The projects fostered the exchange of experiences, namely contact with reference framework for training of experts in the field of poverty and social exclusion and knowledge of public policies that comprehend the integration of these actors in public services and associations, as is the case in the Netherlands and Belgium. In this context, the Association (re)elaborated several tools (reference framework for training, training manual, trainers' guide) in a collaborative venture between academic experts and experts by experience. Based on the conceptualised, the Association developed the training of the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion, thus mobilising 'those with very high poverty rates, the most marginalised' (ENT1).

The reference framework for training has a modular structure and is organised into three components: i) recognition and validation of experiential knowledge; ii) general and technical training; iii) on-the-job training. The structure and logic of this reference framework are similar to those of the reference framework for educational assistants. The training of the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion seeks to promote the reflection, (re)elaboration and socialisation of the experience of poverty and social exclusion, the acquisition of knowledge, know-how and skills deemed essential for intervention in that field, namely by working in tandem with the academic expert. In this case, training is essentially based on the reflection and (re)elaboration of 'the life story' (ENT1) of the subjects involved. The structure of the reference framework for training denotes a concern with the complementarity and interdependence of scientific knowledge and knowledge resulting from life experience. The Association believes that this perspective is essential to mobilise workers with low levels of schooling for training and, simultaneously, to promote the work in tandem.

The biography workshop, promoted by the researcher within the scope of participatory action research, made it possible to collect and analyse data on the characteristics, specific features and importance of the work in tandem, the training of the expert by experience and his/her professional profile. This data was used to refine the professional profile and the reference framework for training for the expert by experience. The researcher also participated in a meeting between the Association and the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education (ANQEP), with the goal of promoting the integration of the reference framework for training of the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion in the National Qualifications Catalogue, as an Adult Education and Training Course, with a twofold academic (12<sup>th</sup> grade) and vocational (level 4) qualification.

### ***The expert by experience and the work in tandem***

During the course of the training provided by the Association, the experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion work in tandem with the academic experts in interventions with the poorest families in the neighbourhood, older adults, victims of domestic violence, young people at risk of school failure and dropout, and individuals with an alcohol addiction. The participation of experts by experience is based on the need to safeguard the ethical principle of involving individuals who are experiencing poverty and

social exclusion in the implementation of measures that interfere with their lives and/or the lives of individuals in similar conditions. These agents identify and accompany those in poverty and social exclusion in the neighbourhood, who experience one or several of the above-mentioned problems.

The experts by experience take on different roles: community workers, interpreters, mediators and educators. Their intervention is extremely important in the promotion of communication and relationships based on respect, empathy and recognition among those who are experiencing problems and those who have not had such life experiences. Through the work in tandem between the expert by experience and the academic expert, the Association experiments with alternative critical intervention models, differing from those based on assistance, in a field marked by complexity and by the predominance of unequal power relations, seeking 'more human and efficient' intervention (ENT1).

The Association's intervention in the area of domestic violence with migrants in poverty is based on the work in tandem between an expert by experience and an academic expert who identify situations, make a diagnosis, define, monitor and evaluate action plans. Due to her life experience and training, the expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion assumes a highly important role in the identification of situations and in the monitoring of domestic violence victims. This accompaniment aims to support the victim in taking measures that can promote her well-being, safety and autonomy before and after the complaint has been filed with the police. The expert by experience informs the victim of her rights and accompanies her in the process of lodging the complaint with the police, to ensure that the process is handled with discretion, seriousness and dignity. This work is very demanding for the expert by experience, namely from a relational and emotional point of view, however the systematic contact with the academic expert, in the work in tandem, contributes to her accompaniment and training.

## Conclusion

The empirical data collected in the participatory action research shed light upon the political dimension (of struggle, demand and change) in the collective action of the residents of the Cova da Moura neighbourhood, most of whom are migrants, poor and with low educational attainment. This collective action denotes a political positioning and the ability, on the part of the residents, to 'capture their reality, understand it in order to transform it' (Freire, 1972, p. 55). By assuming the attitude of subjects geared towards 'self-reflection and reflection on their time and space' (Freire, 1967, p. 36), they promote a 'collective consciousness' (Gohn, 2009) of their possibilities of contributing to change. In this case, hopelessness, related to the difficult living conditions, 'is replaced by hope, when they begin to see with their own eyes and become capable of planning' (Freire, 1967, p. 54) and acting.

The social and educational practices characterise popular education in the neighbourhood and reveal an understanding of the residents as 'social, historical and cultural subjects of the act of knowing' (Oliveira, 1997). Collective processes of a political and critical nature, interwoven with the popular education, are part of the history of the Cova da Moura neighbourhood and are at the origin of the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude*. Through collective and self-managed initiatives, the residents have triggered action based on solidarity, curiosity and a critical spirit to organise life in the neighbourhood, with the potential to promote autonomy, emancipation of the popular classes and social transformation (Freire, 2000; Illich, 1985; Melo, 2012; Melo & Benavente, 1978). Over the last five decades, social and educational practices in the

neighbourhood have sought to guarantee the right to housing and a dignified life, i.e., the 'right to the city' (Wildemeersch, 2018; Wildemeersch & Lages, 2018).

In the last three decades, the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude* has integrated the collective experience and awareness of the residents and promoted their civic and political education through a critical approach of a 'counter-hegemonic and emancipatory' nature (Santos, 2007), characteristic of popular education. This is particularly evident in the way the Association conceives and implements adult education, articulating it with the intervention in the neighbourhood. The lexicon -expert by experience and work in tandem - may be viewed as part of a counter-hegemonic, 'insurgent, alternative' (Santos et al., 2016), critical and emancipatory political process aimed at social transformation. The emergence of emancipatory vocabulary and instruments carries the potential to promote new citizenships (Santos & Nunes, 2003). The new grammar is a constituent element of popular education, as it strengthens the 'theoretical paradigm of the struggles of grassroots communities' (Gadotti & Torres, 2003), as a political and pedagogical alternative to the established educational projects, detached from the interests of the most disadvantaged.

The education and training of the neighbourhood's residents are the structural and cross-cutting fields of its action, achieved through intentional and systematised processes, but also through the educational potential of social, cultural, sports and professional practices. The pioneering character of the guiding principles, of the approach to the social and educational phenomena, of the methodologies, the reference framework, as well as of the instruments designed and used in the Association, points to an epistemological, political and pedagogical position towards social inequality, namely towards the way of understanding migrants, people living in poverty and the territories where they live. This is particularly evident in their conceptualisation of the reference framework and implementation of the training courses for educational action assistants and experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion. The reference framework for training has promoted the dialectic theory-practice relationship, the epistemological recognition of experience and the importance of its articulation with scientific knowledge.

The training of experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion is an academic and professional qualification practices revealing a shift from the dominant logic, as far as contents, processes and relationships are concerned (Foley, 2001). Experts by experience are interpreters seeking to promote 'mutual intelligibilities and to articulate differences' (Santos & Nunes, 2003, p. 26) among individuals with distinct experiences. In their intervention, they assume a critical position in relation to public policies, intervention logics and strategies, and to the social, educational and economic initiatives that generate and/or perpetuate poverty. In addition, they also promote accessibility to available resources, tools and means, with the goal of improving quality of life and exiting poverty.

The work in tandem between the expert by experience and the academic expert falls within the 'ecology of knowledge' (Santos, 2007), as it allows for collaborative and reciprocal learning through the sharing of experiences and knowledge with different characteristics (popular knowledge and scientific knowledge). The training of the expert by experience and the work in tandem are based on the recognition of the importance of the neighbourhood residents' 'knowledge of lived experience' (Freire, 2000, p. 59). This 'knowledge of lived experience' must be the starting point in any popular education undertaking geared towards the creation of more rigorous knowledge on the part of the popular masses' (Freire, 2000, p. 59).

The work of the *Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude* has contributed to the visibility of complex and often silenced social problems. Its dynamics are associated with the emergence of unprecedented social and educational practices that foster a previously

non-existent ‘widening of the present’ and ‘production of reality’ (Santos, 2007). Thus, they are part of the construction of a present and a possible future, one that is more human, more dignified, more supportive, more inclusive, more sustainable and more democratic.

The impossibility of involving other experts by experience and academic experts working in tandem in the Association, to accompany their work and contribute to their training may be deemed a limitation of this study. This type of research poses the challenge of a desirable balance between the research process and the implication for change, which was felt by the researcher. Due to the specific nature and complexity of this type of research, maintaining critical vigilance, which may rely on the support of external entities with experience in research and intervention, is of utmost importance.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

## Funding

This research is financed by national funds from the FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P/MCTES [Foundation for Science and Technology] within the scope of the UIDEF – Unidade de Investigação e Desenvolvimento em Educação e Formação [Unit for Research and Development in Education and Training], Instituto de Educação, Universidade de Lisboa, under the reference UIDB/04107/2020.

## Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Godelieve Meersschaert for her comments and suggestions during the drafting of this article.

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