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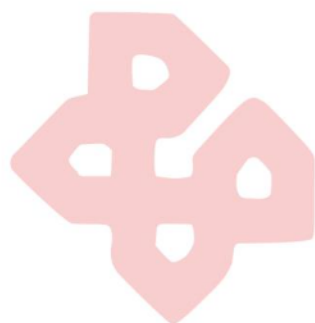
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GROWING UP IN A NEVER-ENDING CRISIS: YOUTH TRANSITIONS AND ASPIRATIONS IN PORTUGAL

Crece en una crisis interminable: transiciones y aspiraciones de jóvenes en Portugal



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Abstract:

Over the past two decades, young people have faced increasing social and economic instability. Before the world had fully recovered from the tremendous effects of the global financial crisis of 2007-08, it was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the effects of such crises being felt unevenly, what are the implications of these challenging times for the educational and professional aspirations of young people in vulnerable situations? To investigate, this paper draws on the lived experiences of young people (15-24 years old) in Portugal, ranging from early leavers from education and training to students currently enrolled both in mainstream schools and other educational institutions. The qualitative data used are drawn from two distinct research projects. By combining these two data sets, we have expanded our understanding of the impact of these crises on young people's aspirations and educational transitions. The findings indicate that, within the framework of successive economic, political and social crises, pre-existing situations of socio-economic disadvantage tend to intensify and may lead to disengagement from school, and even dropping out. Often, the need to help support their families leads many young people to enter a competitive and highly precarious labour market. This article renders visible the impact that structural and systemic factors - intrinsically linked to issues of inequality and social injustice - can have on the educational aspirations and transitions of young people in a society in which 'being in crisis' has somehow become the new norm.

Key Words: *academic aspiration; COVID-19; disadvantaged; educational policy; youth.*

Resumen:

En las dos últimas décadas, los jóvenes se han enfrentado a una creciente inestabilidad social y económica. Antes de que el mundo se haya recuperado completamente de los tremendos efectos de la crisis financiera mundial de 2007-08, se vio afectado por la pandemia del COVID-19. Dado que los efectos de este tipo de crisis se dejan sentir de forma desigual, ¿cuáles son las implicaciones de estos tiempos difíciles para las aspiraciones educativas y profesionales de los jóvenes en situación de vulnerabilidad? Para investigarlo, este artículo se basa en las experiencias vividas por jóvenes (15-24 años) en Portugal, desde los que abandonan prematuramente la educación y la formación hasta los estudiantes actualmente matriculados tanto en escuelas ordinarias como en otras instituciones educativas. Los datos cualitativos utilizados proceden de dos proyectos de investigación distintos. Al combinar estos dos conjuntos de datos, hemos ampliado nuestra comprensión del impacto de estas crisis en las aspiraciones y trayectorias educativas de los jóvenes. Los resultados indican que, en el marco de sucesivas crisis económicas, políticas y sociales, las situaciones preexistentes de vulnerabilidad social tienden a intensificarse y pueden conducir a la desvinculación de la escuela, e incluso al abandono escolar. A menudo, la necesidad de ayudar a mantener a sus familias lleva a muchos jóvenes a entrar en un mercado laboral competitivo y muy precario. Este artículo hace visible el impacto que los factores estructurales y sistémicos - intrínsecamente ligados a cuestiones de desigualdad e injusticia social- pueden tener en las aspiraciones y trayectorias educativas de los jóvenes en una sociedad en la que "estar en crisis" se ha convertido en la nueva norma.

Palabras clave: *aspiración académica; COVID-19; desfavorecidos; jóvenes; política educativa.*

1. When 'being in crisis' becomes the norm

In the context of successive economic and social crises, it is relevant to understand the aspirations of young people with regard to further education and access to the labour market. In this paper, aspirations are understood as the way in which young people formulate a desirable future (Baillergeau et al., 2015). This is

not a simple process, since aspirations are first and foremost linked to having a *capacity to aspire*, which is “largely conditioned by one’s social, economic and cultural background” (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2022, p. 198). For this reason, the sociological construct of (youth) aspirations is particularly relevant when analysing the experiences of young people in contexts of crisis and the inequalities therein.

The global financial crisis of 2007-08 was followed in 2020 by the health, political and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the effects of these crises being felt unevenly (Andrew et al., 2020; Montacute, 2020; Sternadel, 2021; Watson, 2020), what are the implications of these highly challenging times for the educational and professional aspirations of marginalised young people? To address this question, this paper focuses on the aspirations of young people (15-24 years old) with regard to the labour market and/or the possibility of continuing their education.

Before we consider the societal challenges presented by these crises, it is important to acknowledge that structural inequalities, social insecurity and unemployment do not appear to be solely connected to a particular moment of crisis. In fact, a deterioration in the economic and social structures that ought to ensure the integration of all citizens into society has been observed since before the 2007-08 global financial crisis. For example, at the beginning of the 2000s, Du Bois-Reymond and López Blasco (2004) highlighted the persistent failure of public policies directed at young people, and Dolado et al. (2002) identified a boom in temporary jobs, as opposed to permanent contracts. According to Heinz (2009, p. 3), “standard employment has been replaced by flexible work and precarious careers”, which creates a highly volatile socio-economic context within which young people are expected to begin their adult lives.

In addition to these trends, a disconnect has arisen between the labour market and formal education, together with a certain incapacity among educational institutions to adapt to these changes and prepare young people to navigate a world of increasing uncertainty. In the words of Heinz (2009, p. 6), “discontinuities between education and work are experienced by a rising number of school leavers, skilled young workers and college graduates, alike”. Similarly, data collected at European level reveals that the qualifications obtained by young people do not generally fit the requirements of the labour market (Gangl et al., 2003).

Alongside this disconnect between education and the future expectations and needs of young people, it is important to consider the impact of the ‘neoliberal model’, which instructs young people to internalise uncertainty (Cairns, 2013) and “seeks to address collective problems at the scale of the individual” (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017, p. 291) by reinforcing the dimensions of competitiveness and situating education, teachers’ work and ultimately young people as products (Macedo, 2018). This model is now deeply embedded into most so-called democratic societies and their institutions, and affects our very understanding of education. According to Du Bois-Reymond and López Blasco (2004), the neoliberal discourse has been reducing social integration to integration into the labour market. This leads to an instrumentalisation of education, in which the school is perceived as a ‘factory’

producing future workers, a mere ‘platform’ to the labour market. Education emerges, therefore, as an enabler of the neoliberal citizen whose only aim is to obtain employment and become self-sufficient (Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2006), as “a route to self-improvement and social mobility without challenging the capitalist system which creates, and indeed relies upon, inequality” (Holloway, 2014, p. 387). In this vein, “failure in the education system is associated with a future inscribed with failure”, and young people struggle to make sense of their lives and educational trajectories in relation to these “normative benchmarks of success” (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017, p. 292).

Consequently, increasing pressure is placed on young people, who are forced to operate within an environment marked by uncertainty and increasing demands to become more agile, entrepreneurial, adaptable etc. In other words, responsibility for guaranteeing the educational (and life) success of young people has shifted from the state and its institutions to the individual. According to Arnot (2006, p. 59), young people have internalised this “language of individualisation” and use it to justify their lifestyles, as if their pathways were solely dependent on their own decisions. Furlong and Cartmel (2006) refer to this issue in terms of an epistemological fallacy of high modernity, in which the feeling of separation from the collectivity becomes more nuanced, and perceptions of risk and uncertainty are dealt with mainly at the individual level. According to these authors, “blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure” (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006, p. 144). Such attempts to deal with structural issues at individual level are not restricted to young people, but youth policies have consistently reproduced the same fallacy (Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2004; Macedo, Carvalho, et al., 2020; Walther, 2013). Hence, they reinforce the rhetoric of ‘aiming higher’ and taking individual responsibility for one’s well-being and social inclusion (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). Unquestionably, these discourses of individualisation end up masking existing and growing processes of social exclusion that have a tremendous impact, especially on the most vulnerable youth. As noted by Pohl and Walther (2007, p. 536), “the necessity to take individual decisions and to be responsible for one’s own outcomes is also experienced by those who - subjectively or objectively - do not have any choice due to restricted resources and opportunities”.

In this context, it becomes clear that the feeling experienced by most young people of being and growing up in crisis is not solely a consequence of the Great Recession or the recent social and economic turmoil generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent decades, being in crisis has become a fairly constant component of our societies and, in particular, of young people’s educational and life trajectories. This continuing crisis manifests itself in different ways, such as “ubiquitous disparities, increases in university tuition fees, record levels of youth unemployment and the retrenchment of the workfare state” (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017, p. 289). Certainly, these issues tend to be aggravated in times of economic recession; however, they do not appear to register major improvements in times of economic

expansion (Serracant, 2015), indicating that these ‘crises’ are much more structural than circumstantial.

2. Youth transitions in times of (constant) crises

The concept of (youth) transitions provides a relevant theoretical and analytical construct to analyse the impact that living through successive crises has on young people’s aspirations with regard to further education and access to the labour market. This concept is also useful for uncovering the perverse effects that the societal changes highlighted above have on young people’s educational transitions and future aspirations. Issues to be highlighted are the continuation and normalisation of the idea of living in crisis; the instrumentalisation of education and the mismatch between formal qualifications and labour market requirements; and the shifting responsibility from the state to the individual. Youth transitions provide a privileged analytical lens through which to observe the complex dynamics that characterise young people’s experiences in (formal) education and the labour market. According to Heinz (2009, p. 3), transitions “are of special importance because they refer to the timing and duration of the passage to adulthood and stimulate investigations on how life chances, institutional regulations and individual decisions are related”.

The impacts of the neoliberal discourse on youth transitions have been widely documented in the research literature. First, the usually smooth transitions into the labour market that characterised previous generations (Serracant, 2015), appear to have been replaced by “prolonged, diversified, unstable and uncertain” transitions (Pohl & Walther, 2007, p. 535). Indeed, uncertainty has become an intrinsic feature of transitions to adulthood. As a result, a “de-standardisation” of youth transition scenarios has been noted (Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2004). Transitions to adulthood are no longer self-evident to the individuals who have to make them (Walther, 2013). In other words, predictable transitions that are based on assumptions rooted in causal relationships between educational achievement and insertion into the labour market, or between paid work and social inclusion, no longer appear to be valid in contemporary societies. Instead, it is up to young people to “identify the most promising pathways to adult independence and navigate multiple transitions with uncertain outcomes” (Heinz, 2009, p. 5). Second, the expected and socially acceptable timings for youth transitions have suffered major modifications as well. As the same author observes:

Individual biographical timetables do not follow socially expected and culturally transmitted age-norms. The borders between all phases of the life course have become fuzzy, the timing and duration of transitions between childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age are less age-dependent and demand a series of individual decisions. (Heinz, 2009, p. 3)

According to Serracant (2015), youth tends to be a vulnerable period of life that is particularly affected by the multiple and diverse challenges that now mark

(young) people's life trajectories. Transitioning to adulthood and navigating life as a young person therefore emerges as a tremendously challenging endeavour for which there are no guaranteed recipes, and in which transition(s) can be lengthy and cyclical. In other words, young people are required to swiftly reconcile multiple demands (Pohl & Walther, 2007) and, in face of an absence of predictable societal patterns, "invent their own adulthoods" (Henderson et al., 2006). Unfortunately, social and educational policies, (educational) institutional discourses and practices, and the labour market appear to operate primarily according to outdated assumptions in which young people engage in linear journeys and transitions (Baker & Irwin, 2021; Walther, 2013). In this context, it becomes crucial to understand how young people experience and relate to these (still) dominant understandings of transitions as being linear and normative (Baker & Irwin, 2021).

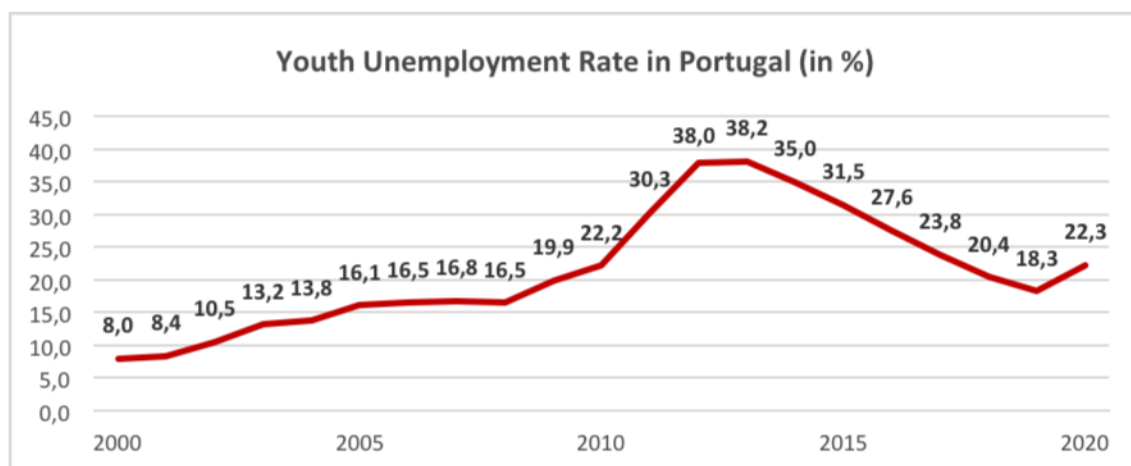
3. The Portuguese context

To understand the complex dynamics that mark young people's aspirations and transitions, this paper draws on a qualitative methodology that focuses on the lived experiences of young people during the successive crises mentioned above. Data were collected within the frameworks of two distinct research projects. One of these covered the effects of the global financial crisis, while the other gave insights into some effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this exploration of young people's educational and professional aspirations, we focus on a particular national and regional context: northern Portugal - more precisely, the metropolitan area of Porto. According to Heinz (2009), when studying youth transitions, it is fundamental to consider the historical and geographical context, given that the way in which this period of life unfolds and is understood varies "according to the economy and the educational and social policies of the state" (p. 6).

Even where relevant improvements have been registered, Portugal is fractured by structural inequalities and, historically, levels of educational attainment have been low. The country was seriously affected by the global financial crisis between 2010 and 2014 - and while the impacts of the crisis affected people of all ages, young people were particularly affected (Nico, 2017). One revealing indicator is the rate of youth unemployment. As shown in the figure below, based on Eurostat data, unemployment among 15-24-year-olds in Portugal rose to nearly 20% at the time of the global financial crisis, and later reached an even more worrying peak (38.2%), in 2013. Despite some improvements during recent years, mainly in 2019 - when this indicator fell below 20% for the first time in 10 years - Figure 1 clearly shows the impact the pandemic crisis has had on levels of youth unemployment, which rose again by 4 percentage points between 2019 and 2020. In other words, the relatively quick succession of the global financial crisis and the pandemic crisis has brought new dimensions of volatility to the labour market. This has affected younger people in prominent ways, given that they are engaged more often in precarious employment (Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2004; Heinz, 2009). Ferrari (2020, p.

33) also observed that losses associated with unemployment “inflicted a greater damage to younger generations”.

Figure 1. Evolution of youth unemployment in Portugal.



Source: Eurostat.

A recent study (Tavares et al., 2021) conducted at the Inequality Observatory from the University Institute of Lisbon, concluded that not only was unemployment among under-25s in Portugal 5.8% higher than the EU27 average, but also that the unemployment among young people has been rising as a proportion of the total unemployment rate since 2018. Moreover, the percentage of NEETs (not in education, employment or training) also increased in 2020, after years of improvement - indicating the clear impact that the pandemic has had on young people’s trajectories. Among those young people who had a job in 2020, 56% had temporary contracts, while 20% had part-time jobs (Portugal has the seventh-highest rate among the EU27 of youth employed in jobs that are involuntarily part-time), another indicator of the precarity that this group faces. In addition, young women are more often affected than men by temporary contracts and part-time jobs (Tavares et al., 2021).

According to the European Commission (2020), while some measures have been taken to tackle this challenge, youth unemployment in Portugal remains high. Adding to the vulnerability of Portugal’s youth population is the fact that youth unemployment rates have not followed the generally downward trend of unemployment in the country, and have instead remained above the EU and euro area averages (Jalali et al., 2020). Similarly, the Social Justice Index compiled by the Bertelsmann Stiftung foundation, ranked Portugal 36th out of 41 EU and OECD countries in 2019 (Hellmann et al., 2019). The following table illustrates the situation and evolution of some key parameters in Portugal as compared to the EU average, such as percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, youth unemployment, and early leavers from education and training:

Table 1
Evolution of key indicators in Portugal as compared to the EU-27 average

People at risk of poverty or social exclusion											
Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
EU-27	23.9	24.5	24.9	24.6	24.5	23.8	23.7	22.5	21.6	20.9	22.0
Portugal	25.3	24.4	25.3	27.5	27.5	26.6	25.1	23.3	21.6	21.6	19.8

Youth unemployment											
Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
EU-27	22.0	22.2	24.1	24.8	23.8	22.1	20.4	18.2	16.4	15.4	17.2
Portugal	28.0	30.3	38.1	38.3	34.8	32.0	28.0	23.9	20.3	18.03	22.5

Early leavers from education and training											
Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
EU-27	13.8	13.2	12.6	11.8	11.1	11.0	10.6	10.5	10.5	10.2	9.9
Portugal	28.3	23.0	20.5	18.9	17.4	13.7	14.0	12.6	11.8	10.6	8.9

Source: Eurostat.

In this table it is possible to see that, despite some variations, in terms of youth unemployment and risk of poverty and social exclusion, Portugal tends to remain above the EU average throughout the years. The indicator for early leaving and education and training has registered a significant improvement in Portugal, in line with the EU trends in this area. However, recent studies have shown Portuguese education policies have been “insufficient to reverse a historic pattern of low overall and unequal levels of educational attainment” (Jalali et al., 2020, p. 16). Indeed, Portugal is among the 10 lowest-performing countries below the EU and OECD average in the dimension of ‘equitable education’ - along with ‘intergenerational justice’, one of the dimensions in which the country achieves its worst performance (Hellmann et al., 2019). In this context, it becomes particularly relevant to address the way in which the successive crises have impacted - and continue to impact - the aspirations of young people in Portugal regarding the labour market and/or the possibility of continuing their education.

4. Methods

To understand the complex transitions and diverse ways in which young people envision adulthood and aspire towards further education and/or the labour market in the context of successive and continuous crises, this study taps into the lived experiences of pupils and young people aged 15 to 24 years. The methodological framework of this paper is anchored in qualitative research, a form of enquiry in which experience is a central part of the ‘object’ under study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As qualitative researchers, we constantly struggle against neoliberal

regimes of truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), which tend to conceal the impact of structural inequalities by focusing excessively on individual agency. Such impact can be explored by listening to the voices of the protagonists of the phenomenon under study - in this case, young people. According to Santos et al. (2020), much can be learned by listening to young people's voices and taking into account their challenges, motivations and needs. Given that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower (Guba & Lincoln, 2011), the accounts of young people on their daily struggles, educational transitions and aspirations are placed at the core of our analysis.

The qualitative data analysed in this paper stem from two distinct research projects. In both projects, we sought to reach out to young people, listening carefully to their experiences and recognising their centrality in education. The data collected within the framework of one project provided insights into young people's perceptions in relation to the global financial crisis and their educational and life trajectories. The second project provided more recent insights into the perceived impacts of the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. By combining these two data sets, we have expanded our understanding of the impact of these successive crises on young people's aspirations and educational transitions.

The first data set was collected as part of the European project RESL-eu (Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe) between 2014 and 2016, a period during which Portugal was especially affected by the effects of the Great Recession. The fieldwork included interviews with 32 young people with different educational pathways (16 attending final years of upper-secondary education, eight early leavers from education and training, and eight who were attending alternative education pathways or institutions). All of the young people were interviewed twice, at different stages, to gather insights into the evolution of their trajectories over time. The second data set on which the present paper relies was collected over the last three years by the project EduTransfer (Learning from diverse educational settings). This project heard the voices of 56 young people, who took part in five sessions of focus group discussions. Of these, 24 participants attended upper-secondary schools, 20 attended professional schools, and 12 were enrolled in a training centre.

The data were subject to content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Three key analytical dimensions were identified and will be explored over the coming sections: i) the aspirations of young people regarding the labour market and education, and how these contexts have been reshaped by the crisis; ii) circumstances relating to young people's lived experiences, such as the weight of making impactful decisions at a relatively young age and in circumstances of uncertainty; and iii) situations of socio-economic disadvantage that directly affect school engagement.

The analysis presented below thus reflects the complex dynamics between, on the one hand, the structural issues in the labour market and the pressure of the labour market on education and, on the other, the identity struggles (and crises) expressed by young people.

5. Young people's aspirations regarding education and work in contexts of crisis

With regard to the impact of successive crises on young people's experiences, previous research has indicated a close link between levels of youth unemployment and early leaving from education and training (Ryan & Lörinc, 2015). While the rate of unemployment among young people tends to be much higher than that of the general population, in times of crisis youth unemployment appears to worsen (Ferrari, 2020). This has a direct impact not only on the willingness of young people to continue in education, but also on their future aspirations and transitions.

On the one hand, high levels of unemployment among young people who have successfully completed secondary education can have a demotivating effect on young people still in education. For example, according to one of our research participants:

[Completing 12th grade] is not enough because many people who have completed 12th grade are unemployed. (Interview with a young woman, aged 20 - early leaver from education and training)

This quote provides an account of a shared impression among some of the young people we interviewed that "there is no point" in attending and completing secondary education, if the result in any case will be unemployment. In other words, unemployment has the effect of undermining motivation towards education and training (Pohl & Walther, 2007). Due to this perception, the idea of engaging in further studies can become less attractive. For instance, the same interviewee notes that not even completing a higher education degree guarantees professional success, let alone secondary education:

There are people who complete a university degree and then work in the supermarket. (Interview with a young woman, aged 20 - early leaver from education and training)

Similar accounts can be heard from other participants, for whom high levels of unemployment have a clear dissuasive effect with regard to the possibility of pursuing higher education:

There are unemployed people who finished university. I'm not going to spend time and money on university. (Interview with a young man, aged 18 - in mainstream education)

Even in cases where young people might, in principle, be interested in pursuing further studies, the perceived impact of crises is clearly noticeable in the discussions young people have about their transitions:

For example, in my class some [fellow students] don't want to pursue studies, because they think it's useless due to the times of crisis we are living in; that they go to university for nothing, that [the result] is to go into unemployment. (Interview with a young man, aged 18 - in mainstream education)

On the other hand, among those young people who might be considering leaving school to enter the labour market, youth unemployment can act as a

demotivating factor to look for a job. This tendency was identified as ‘the discouraged worker effect’, which is linked to “the decision to refrain from job search as a result of poor chances in the labour market” (Van Ham et al., 2001, p. 1748). For young people who are still in education and training, the discouraged worker effect can also act as a motivating factor to continue studying, as could be observed among Portuguese youth during the significant increase in unemployment rates following the global financial crisis. Indeed, the participants in this study often mentioned the difficulties that many young people experience in the job search process:

I have sent my CV to many places, and I have never been called for an interview.
(Interview with a young woman, aged 20 - early leaver from education and training)

In fact, one of the biggest challenges indicated by young people was the difficulty of finding their first job, especially since many employers demand previous working experience:

Boy F: You mean the thing when you’re eighteen and they already want two years of experience, for example?

Girl G: Exactly. I don’t think it makes sense. You just got your degree, how are you going to get (professional) experience?

(Focus group, training centre)

The instrumentalisation of education and its reduction to a mere platform for labour market insertion is clearly visible in young people’s accounts. School is represented as a type of ‘purgatory’ through which young people must go so that they can eventually fulfil their desire to start working:

If it wasn’t for work, some people would even drop out of school or wouldn’t care about school, but since they want to work, they want to finish the 12th grade.
(Interview with a young woman, aged 20 - early leaver from education and training)

The more schooling, the better to get work. (Interview with a young woman, aged 24 - attending an alternative education institution)

In these excerpts, young people attach an instrumental value to upper-secondary education, which is seen as an indispensable precondition for accessing the labour market. This clearly reflects the internalisation by young people of the neoliberal discourse that views paid employment as the only route to social inclusion (MacLeavy, 2008), and legitimises education merely as a means of creating responsible citizen-workers (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). At the same time, this instrumental view of education acts as a buffer for early leaving from education and training, motivating young people to continue studying, albeit against their own wishes. Even though the objective of this paper is to listen to young people’s voices and experiences, it is important to acknowledge that this instrumentalisation of the neoliberal discourse that sees education solely as a preparatory stage for working is not restricted to young people. Similar discourses can be found within educational

institutions and the educational community, including parents and teachers, as highlighted by previous research (e.g., Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011).

Regarding the possibility of enrolling in higher education, the data point towards a clear separation between young people attending mainstream education and young people enrolled in other types of education institutions, especially those with a more vocationally oriented educational offer. In the former case, continuing on to higher education is a central aspiration for most young people and appears, to some extent, to be a societal pressure that they have internalised:

I think that [due to] the way our world is built, anyone who doesn't want to go to university is making a very serious mistake. (Boy A, focus group, upper-secondary school)

I've never been a big fan of school, so the sooner I finish, the better. But I know I have to go to college to get a good job, if I really want to. Otherwise, I'm not doing anything here. (Girl B, focus group, professional school)

We talk about it [university] especially with the class director, and the class director advises us to go to university. (Interview with a young woman, aged 17 - in mainstream education)

In contrast, for young people in other types of educational institutions, entering the labour market is highlighted as the main goal:

My goal is to finish 12th grade and work. (Girl D, focus group, professional school)

Other young people, aware of the constraints of the crisis and the resulting fragile labour market, seem so determined to start working once they have finished 12th grade that they are willing to *accept anything*.

I just want to finish 12th grade to see if I can look for a job. Right now, there's nothing. (...) I have to accept anything. (Interview with a young man, aged 22 - attending an alternative education institution)

Our data indicate that young people present a rather reductive view of their education, who is often regarded solely as a means of transitioning towards the labour market. For many research participants, obtaining a better job emerges as the only motivation for continuing in education.

6. The impact of socio-economic disadvantage and prevailing uncertainty on young people's experiences

Like youth unemployment, other social indicators that have deteriorated in the wake of successive crises also affect the aspirations of young people in Portugal with regard to education and the labour market. Examples of such indicators are unemployed parents and an increase in the number of people at risk of poverty - two indicators in which, according to Eurostat, Portugal has recorded significant

deterioration, particularly in the context of the global financial crisis. Many of the young people interviewed seem to be confronted with struggles against poverty and for the survival of their families. This has a significant impact on their educational transitions and aspirations, since the pressure to obtain an immediate source of income does not allow them to develop and implement a strategic perspective for their professional future, which has become a key requirement for the success of the neoliberal “self-reliant, entrepreneurial citizen-worker” (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017, p. 289).

Boy C: And at this age... I’m 18, and I already yearn for working.

Boy D: Paying bills and stuff...

Girl E: Exactly.

Boy C: I yearn... I don’t yearn to work, I yearn for...

Girl F: Money.

Boy E: Yes.

(Focus group, professional school)

Investing strategically in one’s education emerges as a privilege that not all students enjoy. Our data clearly show how, in some cases, the desire and/or need to help their families keeps young people away from education and training:

I wanted to work to help my mother and sister. (Interview with a young woman, aged 20 - attending an alternative education institution)

[I started working] so that my parents wouldn’t have to bear this burden alone, to help them. (Interview with a young woman, aged 21 - early leaver from education and training)

Families’ budgetary constraints were also shown to condition young people’s educational aspirations:

I wanted to undertake training on computers, but I can’t enrol because that money is needed back home. (Interview with a young man, aged 22 - attending an alternative education institution)

At the same time, public high schools appear to be under significant pressure via school rankings and funding mechanisms and end up putting pressure on their students, especially through a competitive discourse regarding national examinations results (Macedo, 2018). In this sense, schools are permeable to wider social discourses linked to meritocracy (Mijs, 2016) and neoliberal discourses of performativity and individual responsabilisation (Keddie, 2016). Middle- and upper-class families, together with teachers, are especially susceptible to this pressure to follow a market ideology (Lynch & Baker, 2005) that is linked to constant competition between peers and individual responsibility for one’s success (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). According to Neyra (2014), such narratives of success imply that

individuals have the absolute freedom (and responsibility) to choose the educational path that will ensure their social mobility.

Our data indicate that young people in upper-secondary schools internalise this pressure to such an extent that they can hardly imagine a promising professional future without obtaining a higher education degree:

Boy A: You have a school pathway that, for me, for the course that I want to enrol in, counts for 50%, that [will dictate] whether or not I get into the degree course I want. The other 50% is two exams, [which equate to] three hours of my life. I have to work hard for that moment that will dictate if I can be what I want to be for the next 50 years of my life.

Girl A: I think for everyone here, the biggest challenge is getting into university. (...) We may have many other interests, I believe we all do, but university is going to be [a challenge]. Our exam grades will define our future, as A just said. I think it's a very important part of our lives, very central, and it worries us in a way that is sometimes exaggerated.

Girl C: The pressure is also very strong. [From the teachers?] Yes [their biggest concern is that we get into university].

(Focus group, upper-secondary school)

Together with this pressure to enter higher education, young people struggle with the uncertainties and self-discovery crises that are 'characteristic' of their age group. Interestingly, even though the standard and straightforward transitions from school/university into work have been modified by the societal changes described above, young people who aspire to higher education continue to reproduce a vision of professional stability, as if a higher education degree will translate into a life-long profession.

Girl B: One challenge I had was trying to figure out what I wanted to be in the future. Trying to figure out which course was more related to what I wanted, because I had many ideas of what I wanted to be and, in fact, it wasn't that. Right now, I'm in a phase of "Is this really what I want?"; Am I on this course because it feels right at the moment, it's what I want now, but in the future, (what if) I won't find it so interesting?

Boy B: At this moment in our lives, with all the other things that are happening, adolescence is already a complicated phase...

(Focus group, professional school)

However, young people who attend professional schools/training centres also reflect on the opportunity afforded by this type of education, since it gives them work experience through internships that are - according to their perspective - valued by employers, thus making it easier to get their first job, which is aligned with their aspirations to engage in paid work:

Boy E: It's not easy because...

Girl D: They ask for experience, and we don't have any experience.

Girl F: Now we do!

Girl E: With the internships, we have experience!

(Focus group, professional school)

Interestingly, like their peers who are enrolled in mainstream education, we can see how young people embody the agendas of their professional schools/training centres. On the one hand, they show their pressing concerns about future employability; on the other, they reveal their belief that a vocational course is a more reliable way of getting a job:

Boy G: The courses offer employability, [and] that is also very good. 99% of young people nowadays are looking for a job, and with these courses it's very good; you always get it, you are not unemployed.

Girl G: Yes, I think these are [vocational] courses that companies usually value more, and that's good.

Boy H: [Vocational courses are more valuable afterwards, in the job market] because that's supposed to be [the place] where the money will be in the future.

Girl G: And they are more specific [more focused].

(Focus group, training centre)

In this context, young people reproduce a rather simplistic, dictionary definition of employability, seen as the "quality of being employable" (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 199), where the value of their education is judged primarily by its capability of rendering them employable or not. Certainly, employability is much more than an individual's responsibility of possessing a certain set of skills required by employers, and needs to be seen in the framework of wider labour market conditions. As explained above, in contexts of successive crises, economic recession and high unemployment rates, the relationship between education and employability is not linear. For instance, Crespo and Serrano (2013) identify a paradox of the neoliberal discourse which appeals to personal responsibility whilst simultaneously deprives individuals of the necessary social and political conditions to become autonomous.

In terms of future aspirations, the excerpts above also indicate a clear separation between those young people enrolled in mainstream education and those who attend institutions with a more vocationally oriented curriculum. In this context, little room is provided to young people to follow paths that differ from those expected by their families and, to some extent, are dictated by their educational institutions.

Plans to enrol in higher education are more common among students from standard upper-secondary schools. Meanwhile, an eagerness to start working, which

is - often erroneously - associated with financial independence, is more common among students attending vocationally oriented educational institutions. Given the social stigma attached to vocational programmes in Portugal (Doroftei et al., 2018), this separation between the perspectives of different young people with regard to their upcoming transitions is a marker of how social inequalities are still perpetuated, and how education ends up supporting this process of social reproduction (Demaine, 2003; Macedo & Araújo, 2016).

7. Conclusion

In this article, we were particularly interested in highlighting the views and experiences of young people, creating space for the expression of their voices (Macedo, 2018). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the macro and meso-institutional factors that influence the educational experiences of young people. At the macro level, these are associated with the social hierarchy between humanistic scientific paths in general education and the vocational paths, and with the social construction of the latter as 'second choices' for young people seen as less capable, and who will most probably end up working for lower wages and in lower status professions (Doroftei, 2020). At the meso-institutional level, our data indicate that the type of educational institution (general vs. vocational education) and subsequent teacher expectations also impact young people's transitions and aspirations.

The data presented above indicate that economically generated social inequality manifests itself fundamentally as a problem of social class in education; a problem of unequal access, participation and outcomes that arise from unequal access to resources (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 135), and by which transitions and aspirations are severely restricted. As observed by the same authors:

Because the distribution of economic resources plays such a key role in determining the quality of education one receives, and because education is such a powerful determinant of life chances, equality in education cannot be thought of separately from economic equality. (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 135)

Achieving economic equality, however, emerges as an increasingly distant goal in the context of continuing crises and the subsequent individualisation of social problems, as if the only difference between success and failure is that created by individuals' own decisions (Arnot, 2006), while the tremendous impact of structural inequalities is actively and skilfully concealed. Our data also provide an account of how young people internalise such discourses. Educational policies, institutions, the labour market and young people themselves appear to operate on outdated assumptions regarding youth transitions and their supposed linearity. Across our data sets, this becomes visible in the way young people regard their transitions as a linear one-step move from education to work, not taking into account the existence of intercalary periods of study and work and the possibility of returning to education after leaving it, as it is often the case of many young people (Doroftei, 2021). The

fatalistic vision of some young people who see as *a very serious mistake* the decision of their colleagues not to enrol in higher education is also a clear indicator of the simplistic and reductive views that they hold about youth transitions.

At the same time, social class has been framed as a hybrid and complex concept that nowadays must take into account the heterogeneity within each group (Young, 2002), in close relationship with other factors such as gender, ethnicity, language, regionality, etc., which constitute structural locations of power that match up in diverse ways to inform people's class and educational experiences.

Young people's accounts of their aspirations with regard to further education and/or the labour market show that the role of education has been instrumentalised and reduced to that of educating the citizen worker (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017), thus erasing its wider societal role of promoting youth participation and educating engaged, active and responsible citizens (Macedo, Santos, et al., 2020). In this context, young people quite often regard school as an 'inconvenience' they have to go through, a kind of 'purgatory', a necessary yet not desired step on their way to securing paid work.

In the Portuguese context, a shift in the educational and professional aspirations of (many) young people has been noted. Whilst in the last century leaving school was an acceptable trajectory for many young people in Portugal, who were expected to support their families from an early age (Azevedo, 1999; Stoer & Araújo, 2000), in the last decades achieving an upper secondary education degree and even continuing to higher education has become increasingly embedded in young people's aspirations. Nevertheless, our data indicate that a divide between the aspirations of young people enrolled in mainstream education and those who attend institutions with a more vocationally oriented curriculum remains, highlighting that young people interiorise into their personal aspirations the inequalities that mark their educational trajectories.

Our findings raise enormous concerns about the current generation of young people who are growing up in a time of never-ending crisis, in which the only certainty is uncertainty. Despite some diversity of perspectives regarding aspirations and transitions, all young people are forced to navigate a macro- and meso-institutional environment marked by multiple constraints and expectations, which limit their own aspirations and transform their transitions into moments of significant pressure and anxiety. While numerous policies and measures have been introduced at European and national levels to address these concerns and improve young peoples' transitions, as well as their educational and work experiences, such measures have been insufficient (Macedo, Carvalho, et al., 2020; Macedo et al., 2015; Walther, 2013). It appears that the complex and no longer linear relationship between education and the labour market need to be taken into account when designing such policies. To ensure a more stable and promising future for young people, more effective measures must be put in place that are anchored in young people's concrete needs and experiences (Nada et al., 2020). The aim must be to create inclusive environments and institutions in which young people's voices and diverse

needs can be expressed, heard and where young people themselves can make a difference with regard to their own aspirations and transitions (Macedo, 2018).

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