Crossing the gap between high school and Higher Education: The gap year experience

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At a time of decision making crucial to their future many young people choose to step back from it and travel, explore the world, volunteering, learning about other cultures, postponing those decisions. In the moment between finish high school and enter Higher Education or the labour market they choose to took a Gap Year. Given this experience is possible for one to claim that the gappers will bring a different luggage which will make them look for the future with changed eyes. In this paper we will try to understand the way that this luggage, acquired with the gap year, influences the choices and the path of this young people in Higher Education system. This is a multicase study focused on former Portuguese gappers. In order to do this we will interview members of the institutions that fund and promote the gap year, participants in the gap year who are now in college and some family members or close friends that witnessed these changes. In addition we will also review the testimonials and photographic record of blogs produce by gappers with the purpose of understanding the way they lived this experience by analysing the types of situations they registered. Research is still on going. Nevertheless we expect to highlight this recent phenomenon in the Portuguese educational landscape and contribute to question how Higher education system is challenged by it.

Keywords: Gap Year, Transitions, Personal Development, College.

Introduction

At a time of decision making crucial to their future many young people choose to step back from it and travel, explore the world, volunteering, learning about other cultures, postponing those decisions. In the moment between finish high school and enter Higher Education or the labour market they choose to took a Gap Year.

Differently of what happened in Europe, where it has become increasingly popular to take a 'Gap Year' (Jones, 2004; Snee, 2010) in Portugal, this is a phenomenon that has being growing slowly. Four years ago, a private Portuguese foundation started to support these "experiences of a lifetime" arguing, to convince parents, that it will be of the utmost importance for young world citizenship development.

Traveling to improve personal skills and to develop a multicultural mentality are similarly trends that shape educational programs such as ERASMUS and other education policies under EU Commission support.

The distinct idea of Gap Year, related to these Erasmus mobilities is rather individualistic and not supported or institutional framed character that gappers faced. In a previous text authors present and discuss gappers motivations to perform a gap Year (Araújo & Mouraz, accepted). Adventure, the desire to see the world and to know a different reality from their own was the main motives reported. These are related with the above individualistic character of trips.

To what extent does this experience enlarge or modify cultural capital of these young people?

Key issues needed to understand such phenomenon are cultural capital and *bildung*.

In this paper we will try to understand the way that this experience, acquired with the Gap Year, influences the choices and the path of this young people in Higher Education system and contribute to explore to what extent this experience prevent dropout and failure in their higher education paths.

This study explores, through the qualitative analysis of the gappers' discourses, the main issues that the Gap Year experience provide them, highlighting meanings that emerged from their experiences.

Thus, the research hypotheses are:

H1. Impact of Gap Year experience has a motivational nature regarding the academic choice and commitment.

H2. The effects emerging (settled by Jones) from the Gap Year experience differ according to the gappers' gender.

H3.The effects emerging from the Gap Year experience differ in function of the gappers' socio-cultural background.

Methodology

This is a multicase study focused on former Portuguese gappers. 5 males and 2 females participated. The analysis of social-educational indicators (scholarship of parents) made evident the prevalence of students coming from families with a higher level of education. Three of the parents had finished basic education, four parents finished high school and the rest have a higher degree, like a graduation degree and master's degree.

Instruments to collect data were interviews made with participants in the Gap Year who are now in college and some family members or close friends that witnessed these changes.

Interviews made with gappers were focused in four main axes: general motivation to do the travel experience; main features that frame travel choices and aspects that occurred during the travel; difficulties faced during the experience; effects into personal lives and following academic paths. Regarding the interviews made to witnesses the guideline followed focus on two main axes: main motivations for traveling (as the witnesses were told or understood); and main changes they saw in gappers way of being.

In total were made eleven interviews (six to gappers and five given by close relatives), following a semi-structured logic. These interviews were carried out between May and June of 2015. Due to reasons of geographical distance and impossibility of travelling to meet the participants, the interviews were made using Skype. During the moment of data collection all ethical conditions of anonymity and data protection were assured. After this phase the interviews were transcript and analysed using the software Nvivo version 10. Transcriptions were "ideational", meaning that transcriptions were faithful to interviewees' thoughts.

Interview analysis was made following both the work hypotheses, previous stated, crossed with the main dimensions of interviews.

In addition data include the testimonials and photographic record of blogs produced by gappers with the purpose of understanding the way they lived this experience by analysing the types of situations they registered and the cultural capital that experience allowed them. This information was crossed with other empirical material collected.

From a technical perspective, former gappers were identified by a capital letter that allows crossed analysis of different documents (blogs, pictures and interviews).

Results

What gappers fixed by photos.

Our first resources analysed are the photographs which the participants took during the Gap Year. Photos taken and analysed were significantly important and personal to former gappers. In one case the participant send a selection of photographs she made on purpose for this paper, after being asked to do so in the interview. When this particular selection wasn't possible, the participants gave us their permission, despite of the material being online, for searching and analyse the photographs that were in the blogs they have made at the time of the experience. In total we analysed six blogs, however we only could extract information from five of them. Former gappers did organized their photos in albums with different dimensions: from 3 to 60, and roughly corresponding to travelling countries they went.

Despite one of the blogs was not possible to analyse, because the journey of the Gap Year was mixed with other experiences, we can say in a general way that the participants took photographs that can be include in the following categories: monuments, landscapes, iconic locations, streets, food, people and themselves.

Photos made by gappers were different regarding the continents were they travelled: in Asia and Africa photos reported, mainly people in their one habits and daily tasks. On the opposite, when travelling in European countries, monuments and sights were the main focus.

What gappers wrote during their experience.

Our second kind of resources analysed are the written reports which the former gappers made during their journeys and that are published in their blogs. Like the photographs we analysed logbooks from six blogs, however we were only able to extract information from the same five blogs.

The findings in the logbooks are very similar to what we found in the photos, like we mentioned above. As logbooks have been used to communicate with families, descriptions focused on the cities they visited, how they travel, the people they meet along the way, the food, and the people they saw and in some cases, descriptions about the volunteer experience. Doings this allowed families to know where gappers were and received some information about the experience.

Additionally, to time to time they shared thoughts and outbursts, expressing some difficulties and a little homesick after months of travelling. Regarding the main focus of writing, texts expressed objective descriptions of facts they saw or experienced their opinions and comparisons with Portuguese situation. Whenever it was possible text analysis follow the travel sequence.

What gappers said at time distance?

The third resources analysed were the interviews made to the former gappers regarding their Gap Year experience. During the interviews they spoke about some difficulties they had to face, and they also mentioned how the Gap Year helped them to grow and the valuable the experience had in their path in Higher Education.

In the case of L. he pointed as main difficulties being alone (without his parents and out of his usual social context) and also language differences were a problem in some countries.

For H. and B, especially H. the difficulties started even before the begging of the journey, because his family didn't accepted well his idea of doing the Gap Year. Besides this they also mentioned language as a difficulty in some cases, and reported a little trouble adjusting to the habits of African people.

Another former gapper who was volunteer in Africa, was D., and he also gives value to this part of the journey. He represents this experience as a growing one, as it implies an overcoming of challenges (because he didn't have the conditions he was used to have in Portugal) and enhanced the respect for others. Because of this, he considered the Gap Year significant, not only in academic life, but also in extracurricular and personal life. However D. said that the outcomes of the experience aren't tangible, they're intrinsic and he thinks it could be an asset in his personal curriculum.

As the others former gappers, D. focus on the people he met, especially in Africa. Living like the people who welcomed him, taking care of children, teaching them and being able to provide them some care and attention were the things that he remembered most. When D. reported the difficulties he felt, the reaction of the family was the first one. They didn't like his idea of travelling across the world, especially in African continent.

In relation to the journey itself D. mentioned language, especially some popular dialects, as a problem he had to face. Another problem he had to face were dirty houses when he did couch surfing and an attempted extortion, the last one resulted in leaving the house first thing in the morning.

M. was the first former gapper we interview who did the trip alone. He considered this both dangerous and rewarding. As he travelled alone he met new people and he learned to take care for himself without the help of friends or parents, often using unknown people in search for help. As difficulties M. focused in the pressure of street vendors, which make the walks by the city slightly unpleasant. He admitted that sometimes he felt like turning away to Portugal, giving up the idea, especially in a more lonely time or when he was sick.

G. also travelled alone and despite the risks she felt, like M., very grateful to all the people she met, who helped her and that showed her the cities in a way a normal tourist could never experience. Notwithstanding having made the trip alone she didn't considered this a difficulty. Her first problem was convincing her family to let her do the trip.

The last former gapper we interviewed was P., who during her Gap Year did volunteer work in Africa, being that time the most rewarding, like she stated. During the volunteer period she was able to teach the children and also give to them a little bit of attention and care that they crave to have. She also become a more understanding and respectful person towards the different traditions of the communities. Moreover she also gained autonomy, sense of organization, independence, a higher capacity of risk analysis, an ability to relativize things and a more comprehension for the other. This experience contributed to her choice of academic studies, since she decided to charge the course after she came back from the Gap Year. When asked to report some difficulties she has felt, P.

stated she felt had some trouble understanding some aspect of the local culture in the first time. Then, she started to see them in a different way. She didn't mention any other type of difficulty.

To summarize, in the interviews the most frequent difficulties reported were language, especially in non-speaking English countries. Besides that the majority of the participants also stated having had some difficulties in adapting to local habits and certain aspects of the local culture.

The former gappers considered they develop certain skills, like organizational skills, autonomy, leadership skills, ability of overcoming problems and communicational skills. Moreover, to experience "limit-situations" were one of the motivations that seduced gappers and is usually related with solving multidimensional problems in multicultural contexts, benefiting the personal competence to face unexpected and challenging environments – a way to live the experience at the most.

From the development and personal perspective all the former gappers considered they are more mature, more independent and more able to face any difficulties that life will put in front of them. Also faced difficulties were at the same time, equal opportunities to solve them and to develop soft skills in a broadly way. Related to Gap Year influence regarding the choice of academic path to follow it is possible to conclude that gappers made up their minds and made more clear their choices. Experience also contributes to see in a clearer way the importance of education and promote a more committed behaviour of former gappers, as they compare themselves with their actual colleagues.

What the others said

The fourth set of resources analysed is the contributions of the family members or friends which were chosen by the former gappers as witnesses of their changes due to Gap Year experience. Three mothers, one girlfriend and two friends were interviewed (one of the participants didn't sent the information required in the given time of someone who could be his witness).

All of the witnesses confirmed the idea that experience made the gappers return more mature, as they came back more determined about what they wanted for their future and more motivated to accomplish their Higher Education degrees. Also, they stated some changes in the former gappers, like the sense of responsibility and organization, the autonomy and independence and the way they were more comprehensive and open to others. Finally, the three mothers express grateful for the support, company and care the gappers had received during the journey and thanked all the people for welcomed them in their countries, cities and houses.

Discussion

As summarized, most frequent difficulties reported by gappers were language issues, and the different cultural habits they contacted. These two kinds of difficulties were reported by all gappers. Gender or cultural background doesn't justify any difference.

Girls had some difficulties to convince families, but the journey itself doesn't bring to them any particular problem in spite they travelled alone. On the opposite of popular belief it seems that girls, travelling alone, have fewer

difficulties to find accommodation, general support and other travelling sustenance. Also they reported a more generalize care climate among people they contacted. It seems that is a different issue as it was experienced by boys that reported some episodes of less secure feelings. Health problems, which contributed for safety perceptions were experienced by two gappers, and are probably related with homesick episodes, also reported by boys. Therefore, it is not possible to relate gender with feelings but it is possible to relate feelings with safety problems.

Soft skills like organizational, communicational, leadership, problem solving and autonomy were completely required and improved during the travel experience. Levels of effectiveness of such soft skills are broader and deepened than if they didn't did a Gap Year experience. And this is of the most importance to them and their families. This is quite similar to results reported by Jones (2004) and could be read as the kind of impact that Heath (2007) argued.

From a personal perspective, all the former gappers considered they are more mature, more independent and more able to face any difficulties that life will put in front of them. Also faced difficulties were at the same time, equal opportunities to solve them and to develop soft skills in a broadly way.

However maturity doesn't seem to be experienced by all, equally.

Personal autonomy was a feature that can be stated regarding every gapper interviewed. Nevertheless it seems that girls have to prove this autonomy by doing their journey, while boys seem to prove their autonomy to themselves. However, it's not possible to state that autonomy is a difference between boys and girls, as all witnesses stated that gappers were autonomous and participant citizens even before the Gap Year experience. Therefore it's not possible to conclude that autonomy grows differently due to gender. Nevertheless their voluntary work experiences developed during Gap Year period seem to enhance their social values and citizenship awareness. This is in line with O'Shea, (2011) remarks.

Regarding the choice of academic path it is possible to conclude that gappers made clearer their choices and explain a more committed behaviour to academic tasks. Therefore the delay of academic studies was less important than expected. As families discovered, when gappers return, they were more motivated than ever to pursue Higher Education studies. Therefore it is possible to conclude that taking a gap year experience prevents higher Education failure and dropout, as Jones (2004) and O'Shea (2011) reported. Also, some gappers discourse, stating that was not a lost year but an improvement year, seem to be effective to these parents that added innovative paths argument to improve the curriculum vitae. These fears of families were more expressed by these that have less scholarship, but it was not possible to interview such families and do the triangulation of data concerning this issue. So, cultural background of families is, possibly, related with time (un)pressure and curriculum enhancement. Such result is coherent with Bourdieu's theory (1986). This could be related with similar social backgrounds of families interviewed.

Conclusions

This paper focused the way as experience acquired with the Gap Year, shapes their cultural capital and influences the choices and the path of this young people in Higher Education system.

It is possible to state that these young participants change due to their travelling experience as gappers. They came more mature, more able to solve problems, more secure of their choices and life options. Also they seem to be more effective in their academic path. Gender or cultural background doesn't justify any relevant difference regarding the skills that were improved. Nevertheless, autonomy seems to be lived differently concerning gender difference.

As it concerns to gappers' socio-cultural background, research found out that time (un)pressure was the most important descriptor of cultural capital raised by families. The enlargement of cultural thoughts to a broad level that features the concept of Bourdieu that seems to be lived differently in two cases (a boy and a girl) that express more they concerns about the Otherness.

Furthermore it is possible to conclude that Gap Year experience had a motivational impact regarding the academic choice and commitment, shown by ex-gappers when they ingress Higher Education system. This allows the inference that gap year experience could contribute to prevent Higher Education failure and/or dropout.

Thus, one can conclude that Gap Year experience clarify and redirect the choices made by gappers related to their academic path and reinforced motivation among some of them to be a more interventive citizen.

Acknowledgements

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