

Transitions – experienced curriculum by students in transition for other schools or for the labour market

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Abstract

The transitions between educational stages and beyond are crucial moments in the social life of students as well as core aspects of the structure of educational systems in general and of the experienced curriculum particularly (Abrantes, 2005). School transitions have been a frequent topic in research literature (e.g. Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mackenzie, McMaugh & O'Sullivan, 2012). This topic undertakes special relevancy when dropout rates and youth employability crisis are major aspects of the global jobs crisis (ILO, 2012) calling for urgent actions in educational systems at global, regional and local levels. So, there has been increased concern from schools in knowing about their former students' transitions to other schools or to the labour market. The Observatory of Life in Schools has been addressing this concern along with a network of middle and high schools by developing a questionnaire that can easily be used by school leaders to understand how the school curricular and extracurricular work influenced the academic, professional and social transitions of their former students. The questionnaire was completed by 207 former students of 9 schools that participated in the pilot study. The results have been analyzed by grade (9th or 12th) and cross-analyzed in order to detect tendencies and features of the questionnaire that should be improved. The paper presents the results of this pilot study, as well as some insights about school transitions in terms of school choices and the perceptions of students about the experienced curriculum. Some suggestions to improve school curriculum will be made.

Keywords: experienced curriculum; transitions; students; schools; Observatory of Life in Schools.

1 Introduction

Transitions between educational stages and beyond are crucial moments in the social life of students as well as core aspects of the structure of educational systems in general and of the experienced curriculum particularly (Abrantes, 2005). School transitions have been a frequent topic in literature (e.g. Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mackenzie, McMaugh & O'Sullivan, 2012), both from the point of view of students as from a curriculum development perspective (Leite & Pacheco, 2011) related with matters of curricular sequence. However, both rely on the idea that a full integration in contemporary societies demands mastery of *powerful knowledge*, that is, one that is transferable (Nowotny, Gibbons & Scott, 2001) and flexible enough to be applied in diverse contexts or used to interpret and assign meaning to events and situations throughout one's lifetime.

As responsible for a compulsory formal education, school has an increased responsibility to develop the students' knowledge and skills in order to empower them to be able to succeed in their transitions. This topic undertakes special relevancy when dropout rates and youth employability crisis are major aspects of the global jobs crisis (ILO, 2012) calling for urgent actions in educational systems at global, regional and local levels. More than ever, schools must assess the work they do in mitigating these problems and help students to succeed in their life paths. Former students' successful transitions to other life stages might be seen as indicators of the schools' performance in those matters. Since 2012, the Portuguese General Inspectorate of Education (IGE) has started to include these indicators in the schools' evaluation reports. So, there has been increased concern from schools in knowing about their former students' transitions to other schools or to the labour market. Moreover, schools have been seeking guidelines and



instruments that allow them to improve their self-evaluation procedures and data for comparative analysis between schools.

The Observatory of Life in Schools [OBVIE] integrates researchers that work closely with middle and high schools organizing a network of integrative knowledge from research projects, shared expertise, experiences and insights. Recently OBVIE developed a pilot study to help school leaders to understand how the school curricular and extracurricular work influenced the academic, professional and social transitions of their former students

This paper presents this pilot study. It begins by exploring some ideas concerning the study of students' transitions. Afterwards, it presents the main results of a questionnaire that was developed and applied to former students of a network of middle and high schools. Some final remarks about the perceptions of students about the experienced curriculum are made as well as modest suggestions to improve the school curriculum.

2 Studying the students' transitions

The importance of studying the students' transitions lies primarily in their strong relation with the students' integration in other schools and universities. Students' integration depends not only on students' characteristics but also on their previous schooling experiences, both determining whether they will persist and be successful in their educational objectives (Kuh, Kinzie, Brian, Bridges & Hayek, 2006). So, these issues should be given close attention long before concerns with educational achievement arrive, assuming that educational achievement implies a certain degree of successful integration in the new academic or professional stage. Indeed, it is commonly recognized that students having integration difficulties tend to have lower approval rates and greater risk of dropping out (Rhodes & Nevill, 2004). Furthermore, these difficulties also degrade the students' quality of life and generate negativistic environment that may affect the schools' or universities' reputation (Palmer, 2001). Studying students' transitions can give important insights about the successes and difficulties experienced by students in their integration in new contexts and clues on how previous schooling experiences prepare them for an adequate integration.

Some data has been provided by studies on the transition of students to Higher Education courses. Mouraz and Sousa (2011) have suggested that the development of the students' "soft skills" can determine the students' success in their integration. So, bigger attention must be paid to the role of previous academic stages in promoting the students' "soft skills". By the other hand, Costa and Lopes (2008) have pointed out three functional types of difficulties experienced by students that determine different ways and times of failure and maladjustment: 1) lack of information to support academic choices and consequent uncertainty about the correctness of the choice; 2) increased distance from previous supporting networks and consequent doubts about initial objectives; and 3) inability to transfer previously acquired strategies, expectations, relationships, etc., to the new situation. These difficulties must be addressed in early academic stages in order to minimize their appearance in the integration in further contexts.

3 Methods

Three main objectives guided the pilot study described in this paper: (i) To produce and validate a questionnaire to evaluate the work that schools carry out to facilitate their students' transitions to other stages; (ii) To produce knowledge about the features of the experienced curriculum in the students' transitions to other stages and (iii) To identify effects of their formal education in further academic performance and in active exercise of a job.

Before administering the questionnaire, a seminar was organized in the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, in which researchers from OBVIE presented, discussed and validated with teachers from partner schools, the procedures for collecting data and the developed questionnaire. The questionnaire is organized in 4 categories: (I) General informations; (II) Appreciation of the work carried out by the School; (III) Perceived importance of the skills, attitudes, experiences acquired while in the School for the present performance (academic or professional); (IV) Experienced difficulties in the transition from the School for the current situation; (V) Significant episodes experienced in the School. In this respect, it should be noted that the questionnaire intended to collect opinions not only about experienced difficulties but also about successes in order to better identify which "soft skills" play a more important role in the students' integration and how the schools promoted them. Moreover, the questionnaire followed the main



perspectives identified in the literature review regarding students' transitions and focusing on students' skills, schools' interventions and experienced difficulties related with these two issues.

While items from groups I and V had a mixture of open and multiple choices questions, items from groups II, III and IV were sets of statements which the respondents were asked to evaluate through a 5- point Likert scale using the levels: 1 - Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 - Neither agree nor disagree; 4 – Agree; 5 - Strongly agree.

In each of the 9 schools that participated in this pilot study, a pivot teacher was assigned to gather the students' sample and to make available the questionnaire to the students. Between March and May of 2013, 207 questionnaires completed in a valid way were obtained and analysed. A descriptive statistics analysis was made by the last grade attended by the students and by school, followed by an exploratory factorial analysis in order to validate the questionnaire. The intention was not only to give back to schools data about how their former students evaluate their experiences and learning in the School, when comparing to other schools, but also to give back a validated questionnaire that schools can use in the next school year.

4 Presentation and discussion of results of the pilot study

Although several analysis were made to the data, this paper focus the results of the descriptive statistics analysis made to answers to items of categories II, III and IV, organized by the last grade that students attended.

4.1 Appreciation of the work carried out by the School

To present the results of the level of agreement of the students with the statements of these items, the responses were counted by grade. Assuming a quantitative level of agreement of the Likert scale (1 to 5), the average level of agreement was calculated. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Appreciation of the work carried out by the School.

Items	Average level of agreement	
	9 th grade	12 th grade
II.1 <i>I always considered that the School cared about me and my success.</i>	4,14 (σ=0,699)	4,13 (σ=0,505)
II.2 <i>I received all the support I needed to have better results.</i>	4,18 (σ=0,799)	4,24 (σ=0,529)
II.3 <i>I acquired a set of work / study methods that I always use.</i>	3,99 (σ=0,755)	3,87 (σ=0,694)
II.4 <i>I developed competences to work in a team.</i>	4,16 (σ=0,635)	4,31 (σ=0,514)
II.5 <i>I was always encouraged to expose my ideas.</i>	4,07 (σ=0,710)	4,11 (σ=0,682)
II.6 <i>I was encouraged and learned not to give up when I failed.</i>	4,19 (σ=0,783)	4,31 (σ=0,557)
II.7 <i>I did most of the friendships I have today in the School.</i>	4,11 (σ=1,040)	3,77 (σ=1,172)
II.8 <i>I was accustomed to do a self-assessment of my abilities and my weaknesses in the work / study I develop.</i>	4,23 (σ=0,684)	4,07 (σ=0,618)
II.9 <i>I was always told that to be fair, to worry about others and to act rightly were important attitudes for life.</i>	4,31 (σ=0,729)	4,20 (σ=0,625)
II.10 <i>I made contact with knowledge and technology that I did not know existed.</i>	3,87 (σ=0,955)	3,60 (σ=0,956)
II.11 <i>I felt a concern to relate the School contents with our life experiences which made me realize the usefulness of what we learned.</i>	4,10 (σ=0,856)	4,10 (σ=0,856)

The level of agreement with the statements was very high in students of both grades since in almost all statements the average level of agreement was above 4 ("Agree"). Only in items II.3 and II.10, the average level of agreement was slightly below 4. In items II.7 and II.10 the dispersion of answers was very high despite the high average level of agreement of the students. To evaluate the differences between the answers of groups of the two grades, Levene's test of variance was applied and the differences were not statistically significant (> 0,05 for a CI of 95%).



4.2 Perceived importance of the skills, attitudes, experiences acquired while in the School for the present performance

The same procedures were used in this category of items. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceived importance of the skills, attitudes, experiences acquired while in the School for the present performance.

Items	Average level of agreement	
	9 th grade	12 th grade
III.1 <i>I find it easy to integrate myself into a new team.</i>	4,01 ($\sigma=0,795$)	4,02 ($\sigma=0,657$)
III.2 <i>I can recognize that I need help and I know how to get it.</i>	4,17 ($\sigma=0,627$)	4,09 ($\sigma=0,514$)
III.3 <i>I am organized enough to be able to plan and perform tasks in deadlines.</i>	4,04 ($\sigma=0,798$)	4,23 ($\sigma=0,565$)
III.4 <i>I master essential knowledge that is required of me.</i>	3,93 ($\sigma=0,688$)	4,00 ($\sigma=0,482$)
III.5 <i>I like to accept challenges to do things that are not so easy for me.</i>	3,93 ($\sigma=0,820$)	3,89 ($\sigma=0,487$)
III.6 <i>I find it easy to go to the essence of issues that are proposed to me.</i>	3,92 ($\sigma=0,770$)	3,93 ($\sigma=0,580$)
III.7 <i>I recognize the importance of mastering writing competences.</i>	4,18 ($\sigma=0,797$)	4,33 ($\sigma=0,640$)
III.8 <i>I can use information and communication technologies in a sufficient way for what is required of me.</i>	4,13 ($\sigma=0,714$)	4,27 ($\sigma=0,654$)
III.9 <i>I find it easy to explain my points of view to a group of people.</i>	3,89 ($\sigma=0,752$)	3,89 ($\sigma=0,745$)
III.10 <i>I recognize the importance of mastering the foreign languages I have learned so far.</i>	4,19 ($\sigma=0,755$)	4,31 ($\sigma=0,633$)
III.11 <i>I can recognize less proper situations and behaviors of some people, and keep myself away from them.</i>	4,21 ($\sigma=0,772$)	4,49 ($\sigma=0,549$)

Also in this category, the level of agreement with the statements was high in students of both grades, ranging from 3,89 to 4,49. When applying Levene's test of variance to evaluate the differences between the answers of groups of the 2 grades, no statistically significant differences were found ($> 0,05$ for a CI of 95%).

4.3 Experienced difficulties in the transition from the School for the current situation

The same procedures were used in this category of items. The results are presented in Table 3.



Table 3: Experienced difficulties in the transition from the School for the current situation.

Items	Average level of agreement	
	9 th grade	12 th grade
IV.1 <i>I wasn't used to the study / work load that is now demanded.</i>	3,38 ($\sigma=1,189$)	3,07 ($\sigma=1,223$)
IV.2 <i>I wasn't used to the rigor and demand that I now have to put on my study / work.</i>	3,33 ($\sigma=1,242$)	2,91 ($\sigma=1,019$)
IV.3 <i>It was difficult for me to do new friendships.</i>	1,96 ($\sigma=1,207$)	1,75 ($\sigma=0,839$)
IV.4 <i>It was difficult for me to adapt to the new rules I have to follow in my current study / work.</i>	2,52 ($\sigma=1,190$)	2,07 ($\sigma=0,828$)
IV.5 <i>The learning I developed is insufficient what I need now.</i>	2,50 ($\sigma=1,232$)	2,16 ($\sigma=0,843$)
IV.6 <i>I found no people available to understand my difficulties and help me to overcome them.</i>	2,08 ($\sigma=1,147$)	1,98 ($\sigma=0,771$)
IV.7 <i>The study / work that I develop now does not suit my expectations.</i>	2,38 ($\sigma=1,182$)	2,19 ($\sigma=0,824$)
IV.8 <i>It was difficult for me to solve practical issues of everyday life.</i>	2,34 ($\sigma=1,154$)	1,86 ($\sigma=0,675$)

Unlike the previous categories, the average level of agreement of the students with these items was moderately low in students of both grades (below 3), but with a high dispersion in their answers. Only in items IV.1 and IV.2 the average was above 3 suggesting some level of agreement with the stated difficulties in the study / work load, rigor and demand. When applying Levene's test of variance to evaluate the differences between the answers of groups of the 2 grades, statistically significant differences ($< 0,05$ for a CI of 95%) were found in items IV.2 and IV.4. Data suggests that former 9th grade students valued the experienced difficulties in the rigor and demand of their study / work in a higher level than former 12th grade students. Also, former 9th grade students seemed to have experienced more difficulties in the new rules of their study / work than former 12th grade students which might be related to the fact that the given support by schools to Basic Education students is traditionally more individualized than the one given to Secondary Education students.

5 Final remarks

The presented data suggests that the surveyed students tend to positively value the work done by the schools they attended and their effects on current integration and devalue the experienced difficulties in their current situation.

For example, and regarding the appreciation of the work carried out by the School, the 2 items more highly valued by former 9th grade students were the promotion of a self-assessment of abilities and weaknesses in the students' work /study (II.8) and of fairness and righteousness as important attitudes for life (II.9). By the other hand, the 2 items more highly valued by former 12th grade students were the development of competences to work in a team (II.4) and the given encouragement to never give up towards one failure (II.6). In which concerns perceived importance of skills, attitudes, experiences acquired while in the School for the present performance, former 9th grade students valued quite highly the recognition of less proper situations and behaviours and the need to move away from them (III.11) and the recognition of the importance of mastering foreign languages (III.10). Likewise, former 12th grade students also valued quite highly item III.11, followed by the recognition of the importance of mastering writing competences (III.7).

The only difficulties that stand out for being slightly more valued, either by students making the transition to Secondary education (9th grade), whether by students who moved to Higher Education (12th grade), are those associated with the increased volume, rigor and demand of the study / work in the academic cycles they are presently attending. However, the dispersion of the results indicates very diverse experiences in students. Students who go to Secondary Education also appear to experience greater difficulties in following new rules of study / work, which may have to do with the fact that the support given to students in Basic Education is usually more individualized than in Secondary Education. Accordingly, the acquisition of a set of work / study methods (II.3) and the possibility of making



contact with new knowledge and technology (II.10) were less valued items by students of both grades, which might, in part, explain some of the experienced difficulties.

These data suggests that the partner schools have been on the right path in developing projects that help students to feel well integrated in their future contexts and provide them with important “soft skills” to make an easy transition (e.g., persistence, ability to work in a team, ability to self-assess, sense of fairness, etc). However, further educational projects should take into consideration a better preparation of students in terms of study / work methods to face increased volume and rigor in their future academic and professional performances.

It must be remarked, though, that deepened studies and analysis must be made to confirm or refute these results with wider samples of schools and students. As this was assumed to be a pilot-study, the current availability of a validated questionnaire will hopefully allow researchers of OBVIE to broaden the research in this topic during the next year.

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