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SCHOOLING AND PROFESSIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE: A VIEW FROM THE EUROPEAN PERIPHERY[†]

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Abstract

In this article we discuss the role of school diplomas in the transition of young people to adulthood. To analyze this role we pay special attention to the professional trajectories of young people in contemporary societies. The empirical analysis was carried out in a Portuguese region particularly suited to this analysis thanks to the great dichotomy between young people with excellent education levels and youngsters that feature low education levels and are early school leavers. The findings demonstrate the existence of four profiles that reflect the diversity of professional paths of young people, different kinds of dominant schooling pathways in each one, the mainstreaming of job insecurity in all profiles, and finally the emergence of new forms of transition between unemployment and employment.

Keywords: Young People, Transition from School to Work, Job Insecurity, Professional Trajectories, Schooling Profiles

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, Western societies have experienced a complex set of social changes that has generated a number of consequences. The extensiveness and intensity of these changes have led some authors to forecast a change within the capitalist system itself (Castel, 2009; Kovacs, 2013). A major impact has been the increase of inequality in terms of income distribution and the associated changes in the relationship with work (Beck, 2005; OECD, 2011; OECD, 2012; Piketty and Saez, 2014), especially with the persistence of mass unemployment and with the deregulation of the labor market that has led to the growth of job insecurity and atypical forms of employment (Kovacs, 2013; Castel, 2009; Oliveira *et al.* 2011).

We recognize the polysemy of the concept of job insecurity, and we understand that the insecurity of an employment situation stems from the instability associated with the employment

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contract, from the uncertainty of income and from limited access to forms of social protection. International comparisons within the OECD countries continue to demonstrate that the use of atypical forms of employment – part time employees, employees under temporary contracts or self-employed workers – varies depending on the countries and professions, but the selective nature of these forms of employment is clear: young people are particularly affected since half of temporary workers are under the age of 30 (OECD, 2015).

But the relationship of young people with the labor market is more complex than unemployment and job insecurity. There is also a multitude of intermediate forms that lie between employment and unemployment, tangling the transition to adult life and diffusing the boundaries between employment, unemployment, activity and inactivity (Beck, 2005). These forms include not only the extension of schooling brought about by the perceived lack of job opportunities but also internships, non-school training (sometimes paid) and occupational programs (Ferreira, 2014).

Although the European context showcases quite heterogeneous states of affairs in what concerns the transition from youth to adulthood, “structured by a complex system of socio-economic structures, institutional arrangements and cultural patterns” (Walther, 2006, p.124), the metamorphoses observed in the labor market are consolidating professional integration processes of young people that tend to act as an integration in the temporary as a way of live (Castel, 1998), a situation that is particularly evident in southern European countries where “labor market segmentation and a lack of training contribute to very high rates of youth unemployment” (Walther, 2006, p.129).

In this article we discuss the role of school diplomas in the transition of young people to adulthood, taking into account the various constraints that impact it and that have become increasingly more complex. To analyze this role we pay special attention to the patterns of labor market integration of young people in an outermost region of the EU.

2. Educational Paths and Professional Integration: A Research Field Facing an Update

When conceptualizing the school-to-work transition and the professional integration of young people, some authors highlight the fragmentation processes of professional paths (Biggart and Walther, 2006; Furlong *et al.* 2006), suggesting that we should analyze the trajectories of young people through the prism of an individualization of the professional integration processes (Furlong *et al.* 2003; Hardgrove *et al.* 2015) and of a biographical singularity, since the specificities of social experiences tend to turn these trajectories into hardly replicable processes (Furlong *et al.* 2006).

But what studies continue to reveal is that the economic deterioration and the tendency for insecurity to increase in labor relations impact young people differently according to their socio-graphic features, particularly their gender, their position in the social structure and the quality and duration of their education and training. Some of these studies demonstrate how low-skilled youngsters (Furlong *et al.* 2003; Guerreiro *et al.* 2009) are particularly permeable to job insecurity and long-term unemployment (Cotis *et al.* 1997).

Regarding Portugal, Guerreiro *et al.* (2009) have developed a qualitative study focused on this group of youngsters. Characterized by prematurely leaving the education system and being often relegated to low-skilled and poorly-paid jobs, the relationship of these youngsters with education is marked by school failure, disregard for the knowledge acquired at school and a weak involvement and interest in education. In a context where professional flexibility is increasing, professional integrations often do not offer job security, are punctuated by high labor turnover and do not include training, with workers showing deep job dissatisfaction. Among the young people interviewed, few have “targeted career pathways” (Guerreiro *et al.* 2009, p.147), that is, professional itineraries marked by permanent labor functions in the same economic sectors. Most of them experience “itinerant career pathways” (p.144), although the occupations and sectors where they work are differentiated by their gender and the educational capital that they possess.

But not only the most unskilled young people experience difficulties in their transition process from school to work. Portuguese and international research focused on the professional

paths of young graduates (Fournier *et al.* 2002; Ramos *et al.* 2014) has highlighted the rarity of linear and predictable pathways, although some enjoy more stable and better paid jobs compared to their less qualified peers. What both studies mentioned show is the diversity of pathways followed by graduates, with such diversity heavily depending on the field of studies, on the economic resources of the family and on the gender. Although it is possible to find successful socio-professional integrations with stable and favorable occupations— after periods of strong labor mobility between precarious jobs, unstable employment situations stand out, with many young people experiencing a hiatus that sometimes ends up in precarious paths and even exclusion, while encountering huge obstacles in their professional integration and experiencing enormous financial difficulties that hamper the financial and housing autonomy of a large percentage of these youngsters.

This research has allowed us to understand “the structural complexities of labor market transitions faced by young people” (Hardgrove *et al.* 2015, p.15) and to become aware of the uncertain and fragile social conditions under which the professional integration processes of young people take place today in different parts of the world.

3. Methodology and Data

The findings analyzed in this article were collected in the Azores, a Portuguese region with an autonomous government in the north Atlantic. The Azores feature low schooling rates in the Portuguese and European contexts and a percentage of young people in the total population (21.6%) that is much higher than the national average (Vieira *et al.* 2015). These two features turn the region into a relatively unique case in the national context and, at the same time, into a particularly interesting case study. The main trends that define the relationship with school and school qualifications in the Portuguese society (and that set it apart from the rest of Europe) are more clearly visible here, particularly the dichotomy between individuals with long and exemplary educational backgrounds and those with short and unsuccessful ones, as well as the persistence over time of enrolment and schooling rates far below the desirable levels.

The study of the Portuguese experience underlines the importance of social background and of education for shaping the social destination of young people, particularly in the access to the labor market, but also the existence of a considerable gap between the more typical paths of the most developed countries (with higher levels of education) and the short educational backgrounds and early entries into the labor market (Kovacs, 2013; Guerreiro and Pegado, 2006; Guerreiro *et al.* 2009).

And regarding the Azores, to what extent do different schooling profiles define different forms of participation in the labor market? To answer this question, we interviewed 1.047 Azorean youngsters (aged 15 to 34) who held or had held a job for a research project developed between 2008 and 2011 at the Azores Youth Observatory supported by the Azores Regional Government.

The sample was assembled using the stratified sampling method, and we controlled the age, gender, educational level, marital status and employment status variables. Data were treated using various statistical methods, and we should highlight that we have used a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) in order to study the associations between the categories of the different nominal qualitative variables of the study.

Based on the discrimination measures of the variables, we can identify those that contribute the most to the definition of the two main dimensions: the first dimension can be called *professional trajectories* and the second *schooling profile*. While the first dimension is fundamentally structured by variables related to the occupation, which we have linked to socio-demographic variables (age, marital status and gender), the second dimension includes variables connected to the educational background and its repercussions on professional integration. We have extracted two dimensions that cover 71.2% of the total variance; dimension 1 covers 46.1%, while dimension 2 covers 25.1%. The internal consistency of each dimension was measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with these first two dimensions exhibiting relatively high values of this coefficient, namely 0.894 in dimension 1 and 0.728 in dimension 2.

agriculture, fisheries, construction, retail and restaurants. We should note that there are few young people (35%) who report having a permanent employment contract.

Judging by the way they qualify their income (80.4% report that it is insufficient or very insufficient), they potentially live in poverty or face social exclusion. But the obstacles for them to claim their social rights also stem from the fact that many of them entered the labor market before the age of 16 (41.5%). We should note that 16 is precisely the legal working age in Portugal if you have, at least, 9 years of schooling completed, which is also not the case of these youngsters.

Despite the decline of child labor in Portugal in recent decades (UNICEF, 2013), we continue to witness situations in which minors carry out some professional activities exclusively, regardless if they are paid or not, which illustrates the persistence of traditional features in the Azorean society. Carrying out a professional activity has harmful implications for the development and quality of life of children, because in addition to possibly endangering health and safety, child labor certainly contributes to decrease free and study time, as well as opportunities to socialize with peers. Some cases of non-compliance with compulsory education have been flagged in Portugal by the Commissions for the Protection of Children and Young People (CPCJ)¹ as a consequence of the early and disqualified integration of young people in professional activities. This occupational integration is often justified as an alternative to poor school performance, and we also demonstrate in this study that the vast majority of youngsters represented in this group (82.2%) failed a year at least once throughout their time at school.

4.2. Stable Integration Trajectories (Cluster 2)

The characteristics of young people included in this cluster fall into the “ideal type of the Fordist wage relationship model” (Ramos *et al.* 2014, p.394). This group (30.5% of respondents) gathers the most educated young people: 39.75% have completed secondary education and 28.7% are higher education graduates. They are also the ones who have stayed longer at school since 73.9% left school aged 18-24. It was also at this age that they got their first job (75.7%). There is a slight predominance of girls (57%) in this group, with these youngsters being relatively well integrated in the labor market and occupying well paid (25.4%) or very well paid (29.8%) positions. Most of them work in the transport and service sector with a full work schedule of over 35 hours a week (61.7%) and the majority (76.4%) states that they have already been promoted.

Nonetheless, if we take into account the contractual situation of these young people, we realize that instability is also pervasive, given that 54.1% of those included here work under precarious contracts (fixed-term or “another precarious situation,” probably as independent contractors). However, the applicable (and dominant) type of contract in southern European countries is the permanent contract (with significant obstacles to lay off workers).

Among all the young people surveyed, this is the only group that features a trajectory that is closer to a linear path between school and entry into the labor market. If we take into account the representativeness of this sample, this means that, in the context of the Azorean youth, only 3 in 10 youngsters enjoy a faster transition with fewer surprises from school to the labor market.

4.3. Dual Exclusion Trajectories (Cluster 3)

Young people that are part of this group (22.3% of the sample) leave school before or when they are about to complete the nine years of basic education. In fact, 83.6% interrupt their education before the age of 17, so almost all of them (95%) only attend nine years of school or less. Moreover, these school leavers quite likely find it difficult to integrate themselves into the school environment if we take into consideration school failure, as 75% of them have failed at least once and 47.5% have experienced recurring failure.

¹ Annual Assessment Report of the CPCJ (2014) is available at <http://www.cnpcjr.pt/preview_documentos.asp?r=5603&m=PDF>.

However, exclusion from school is not the only feature that sets these youngsters apart; the fact that 70.4% of those included in this group are unemployed sets up a double exclusion process (and it is mainly this fact that differentiates them from cluster 1). Their employment situation justifies the fact that many of them do not earn any type of income (53.3%) and that the remaining ones receive social benefits (48.8%), which legitimately leads them to qualify their income as very insufficient (44.1%) or insufficient (50%). Although they declare to be currently unemployed, many have worked in the construction (33.3%) and retail and restaurant (33.3%) sectors under fixed-term contracts (68%). These are precisely two of the most representative activity sectors of the Azorean economy and stand out for employing a large number of individuals with very low wages.

Given this socio-graphic profile, these could be long-term unemployed youngsters with a very low likelihood of returning to the labor market. Looking at the problem of long-term unemployment, Wuhl (1996) emphasizes its social stigma noting that the chances of staying unemployed grow exponentially according to the duration of such status, transforming a significant part of the unemployment caused by professional transition into unemployment that leads to exclusion.

This group of young people, in particular, combine the three great “sources that reproduce inequality, poverty and social exclusion” (Guerreiro *et al.* 2009, p.12), which are dropping out from the education and training system², the lack of facilities and opportunities for the education/training of adults and unemployment.

4.4. Suspended Trajectories (Cluster 4)

Despite having a reduced number of elements (9% of respondents), this group has sociological relevance, since it comprises young people who are unpaid interns at small companies and interns paid by the government. In this group, most are aged 15- 24 and; the gender distribution is balanced: 47.7% are men and 52.3% women.

Since this cluster includes young people with different educational qualifications, we are led to conclude that we are dealing with very different situations. For the 25% of youngsters of this group that hold a university diploma, we are talking about internships that are conceptualized as a way to promote an approach to professional contexts and to facilitate future employability. In the immediate term, these internships do not create or guarantee employment because most interns do not become contractually linked to the organization and, therefore, their situations of insecurity and instability are extended, with the youngsters being forced to postpone the materialization of their life projects (hence the name adopted for this group).

Boyer, in the foreword to Rose (1984), noted that these professional integrations end up “institutionalizing” insecure relationships with employment, under the pretext of preparing a workforce adapted to the market needs and of reducing unemployment. On the other hand, as Rose (1984) mentions, this work experience will hardly fulfill the purpose for which it was created, namely the intention of adapting young people to the changing forms of labor, because it uses as its reference a very specific moment of the organizational processes and because, we may add, these young people are often used to undertake fragmented, bureaucratic and routine tasks in the host organizations that do not allow them to develop relevant transferable skills that can actually be carried over to other organizational contexts.

This group also includes 43% of youngsters who are still attending the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education (6 and 9 years of schooling completed with success to obtain the respective diplomas), which leads us to believe that these young people are part of training-integration programs that alternate training in school and in workplace settings. These integration programs are targeted at young people with education paths marked by failure, who are at risk of dropping out of school before completing basic education³, and are part of the effort of the Regional

² Defined by the EUROSTAT as the percentage of the population aged 18-24 that has completed, at most, basic education and is neither studying nor receiving training.

³ At this time, Portugal is transitioning from 9 to 12 years of compulsory education.

Government of the Azores to diversify training opportunities to eradicate the high failure rates in basic education and to prevent early school leaving.

5. Conclusion

We consider that the data presented demonstrate that education may allow some youngsters to build stable professional careers, but collectively we find that the heterogeneity of school experiences creates deep divisions within young people, especially because the advantages that the most qualified ones get from their diploma seem to highlight and deepen the disadvantage of the less skilled (Dubet *et al.* 2010). In contexts where the multiplication of school diplomas is concurrent with their devaluation, the more diplomas youngsters get the more protected from the risk of social disqualification they become, when compared to their less qualified counterparts.

Taking into account the outlined typological analysis, it was possible to configure four professional paths designed according to the schooling profiles. The situations of instability, insecurity and exclusion that affect the vast majority of these youngsters (69.5%) stand out. Only one group, the more qualified one, features relatively stable paths or rather “insecurely stable” paths, because despite having more favorable professional situations when compared to their more disqualified peers, we have realized that they also feel the effects of the social transformation in the labor market mentioned in the introduction through contractual instability.

In this sense, the school-work transition of Azorean youngsters and their entry into adulthood appear to be difficult across the board. In the data we have presented, we can identify the three major factors that we have theoretically approached as elements that increase the complexity of this transition: youth unemployment, job insecurity and the proliferation of intermediate statuses between employment and unemployment, particularly evident by the existence of cluster 4. It is the uneven configuration of these factors along with educational inequalities that explains the formation of the different groups.

Moreover, these findings also contribute to clarify the schooling shortfalls in this outermost region, because contrary to what happens in most European countries, there is still significant number of young people (60.5% of this sample) that leaves school prematurely and chooses professional integrations without a minimum of 12 school years. This situation poses added challenges for this region as it tries to tackle its structural backwardness in the creation of universal education solutions and to reduce its distance to the modern standards of other European countries.

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