
Students' transitions to senior phase

– Voices of students about the curriculum and curricular work in schools

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CONTEXT

Students' transitions to upper secondary education have received some attention in international research literature (e.g., Akos & Galassi, 2004; De Wit, Karioja, & Rye, 2010; Elliott-Johns, & Jarvis, 2013; Smyth, 2016; Torres & Mouraz, 2015). However, the voices of students are rarely heard when it comes to understanding the ways in which they experience the curriculum in the transition stage, particularly in changing educational contexts; due to changes in the school organisation and management (in the case of Portugal), or to changes in curriculum and assessment (in Scotland context). This study will explore students' perspectives about course choices, the difficulties which they experience, their expectations, and their experiences of the curriculum in upper secondary education after the transition to this schooling stage (approximately age 15). Picking up the methodology of a previous study (Torres & Mouraz, 2015), we will capture the voices of students using mixed methods, which combine a survey with focus group discussions and biographical interviews. Some data has been collected in Portugal, where attending upper secondary education has been compulsory since 2012. The idea now is to collect data among S4 senior phase students in Scotland, where this transition stage also poses some problems and challenges to both students and schools. This study is a part of the post-doctoral project of Ana Cristina Torres, ongoing in the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto (Portugal) and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Stirling (Scotland), with a fellowship from the Portuguese *Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia* / Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BPD/108950/2015). The study is being supervised by Professor Helena C. Araújo (FPCEUP-Portugal), Ana Mouraz, Ph.D (FPCEUP-Portugal) and Professor Mark Priestley (University of Stirling, Scotland).

OBJECTIVES

1. Identify strengths and difficulties of academic, procedural and social integration that students experience when entering the senior phase (Scotland) / secondary education (Portugal).
2. Compare the experience of students in different courses, curriculum structures and school organisations.
3. Characterize the perceptions of students about the experienced curriculum and its assessment in the transition stage to the senior phase.
4. Analyse the relationships between the students' course choices and expectations and the difficulties they experience in the transition stage as well as their perceptions of the experienced curriculum in senior phase.

QUANTITATIVE PART: SURVEY

Procedures to ask of schools: All secondary schools are invited to participate in the quantitative study by allowing for their S4 students to participate in the survey. If schools are willing to participate, they will only be asked to make arrangements for all S4 students to complete an online questionnaire within the schools facilities, by June 2017. The questionnaire will be designed and made available online by the researcher. It will focus on difficulties the students experienced in entering the senior phase and their perceptions about the experienced curriculum in senior phase. The findings of this pilot survey will be returned by the researcher to each school and may be discussed with its head teachers. Data from the survey will be returned to schools in the form of school reports with analysed data from each specific school. No raw data or data from individual questionnaires will be made available to schools.

Procedures to ask of students: To voluntarily respond to an anonymous online questionnaire (estimate response time up to 30 minutes) (June 2017). As the questionnaire will be anonymous, the voluntary completion of the questionnaire will serve as informed consent.

QUALITATIVE PART: FOCUS GROUPS AND INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Procedures to ask of schools: This will only take place in a small number of secondary schools due to the amount of time that will be needed to collect and analyse the data. If the invited secondary schools are willing to participate, they will be asked to invite four to five randomly selected female students and four to five randomly selected male students from S4 classes to participate in a focus group session (February 2017). These focus groups have to be relatively homogeneous in terms of the kind of curricular pathways students are attending: whether those pathways are mainly academic, mainly vocational or a combination of academic and vocational courses. So, more than one focus group may be needed to separate these groups. Afterwards, four of these students, preferably enrolled in different courses, will be invited to grant individual interviews to the researcher about the same issues, in which some personal information and features of the students school paths can be explored (March 2017). The schools will be asked to make arrangements for the students and their parents or carers to read, understand and sign informed consents. Detailed clarification can be provided by the researcher, either by email acctorres@fpce.up.pt or skype to acctorres@hotmail.com. The schools will also be asked to facilitate the use of a room within the schools premises, to be used for the focus groups and the interviews.

Procedures to ask of students: Students will be asked to read, clarify and sign an informed consent term as well as their parents or carers. They will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion within the school premises in February 2017 (up to 2h). Finally, four of them, if available, will be asked to participate in 1 to 3 biographical interviewing sessions (estimate up to 1:30h) with the researcher during March 2017. The number and time for each session will depend on the students' availability and will to detail or not their answers.

SHARING AND DISCLOSURE COMPROMISES

The researcher commits herself to return the overall findings of all the focus groups and the findings of each specific school in the survey to each school, as well as make available the questionnaire so it may be used in subsequent years. No raw data will be made available, nor data from the individual interviews prior to its analysis. The students' identities and personal information will be confidential in all the returned findings. The researcher will also be available to discuss the results with the school senior leadership teams if they wish to.

| TIMELINE | 2016 | | 2017 | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| | NOV | DEC | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC |
| DATA COLLECTION – QUALITATIVE PART | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Selecting students (with schools) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Informed consent terms | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Focus groups | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Biographical interviews | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| DATA COLLECTION – QUANTITATIVE PART | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Online questionnaire | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| DATA ANALYSIS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| RETURN OF RESULTS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| To students, schools and LAs: focus groups | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| To schools and LAs: results of questionnaire | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| To students and schools: analysed interviews | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

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