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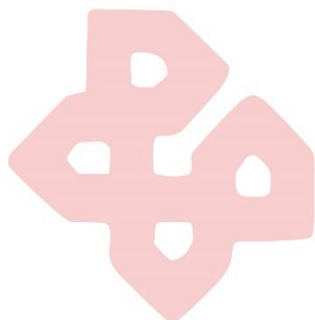
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EDITORIAL

THE CAPACITY OF NAVIGATION UNDER CONDITIONS OF VULNERABILITY. YOUTH BETWEEN SCHOOL, TRAINING AND WORK, ON TWO CONTINENTS

Capacidad de navegación en condiciones de vulnerabilidad. Jóvenes entre escuela, formación y trabajo en dos continentes



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Investigating experiences of transition between life phases, particularly at moments of profound change, helps understand the deeper structures and relations of societies (Walther et al., 2022). While youth, adulthood, and old age were clearly distinguished in the mid-twentieth century, adulthood and youth afterwards started to overlap, not least because the transition from school to work is no longer a linear, one-

way process. Due to deep socioeconomic transformation, the labour market and the distribution of income have increasingly blurred these distinctions.

Previous research has observed that public policies regulate education and training, employment, housing, and social welfare in significantly different ways, impinging on transitions from school to work. The resulting institutional regimes adopt particular definitions of the main disadvantages that affect youth in education and employment. Walter (2017) noted that Scandinavian countries define these disadvantages as problems of social rights, while Central European countries attribute disadvantages to disruptions of the labour market. In contrast, Anglo-Saxon countries often blame youths for their low level of skills, and Mediterranean countries simply consider that such disadvantages are one of the inevitable problems of growing up. This special issue will explore the key themes of this literature within a wider geographical sample that takes both European and Latin American countries into account.

The main focus of the special issue is the school/training-to-work transition (STWT) among vulnerable youth in a variety of geographical and policy contexts. In particular, it focuses on young people from social minorities, ethnic and racialized groups that display functional diversity and/or have experiences of social exclusion, and those who experience high levels of daily mobility due to their disadvantaged geographic location, in the contexts of multiple crises and their effects in Europe and Latin America. The articles in the special issue highlight the diversity of structural, institutional, and social conditions that influence STWT and the lived experiences and responses developed by the young people who are facing these new and old challenges.

The study of STWT patterns and experiences can generate highly relevant insight for educational research. The focus on examining STWT trajectories through qualitative methods by anthropologists and sociologists is helping spell out the consequences of unequal academic performance. Although the well-known, close correlation between socioeconomic status and performance affects the decisions of students particularly at institutional crossroads (Bereményi, 2022; Walther, 2005), the articles in the special issue show that performance is not the only factor. Many people do not drop out of education and training because they feel unable to complete upper-secondary vocational education or even tertiary and higher education courses. On the contrary, an intricate constellation of constraints, barriers, cultural understandings, prejudices, economic pressures, personal emotions, and other factors impinge on their decisions. These findings are particularly relevant for the current agenda of education and training, which puts lifelong learning at the forefront (Rambla et al. 2019). At any given moment, teachers and schools cannot do much if the whole spectrum of programmes that is available is not meaningful to young and adult students. Decisions about curriculum and instructional designs are blind if they are not grounded on a valid understanding of why graduates make the choices they do after leaving school.

In general, STWTs are divided by class and gender (Bukodi et al, 2018). Students from households with a lower socioeconomic status are typically not as ambitious as students who have a more affluent background. They choose less prestigious

programmes and are more likely to drop out. Although women have traditionally been more modest in their educational aspirations and less successful than men, it is significant that in the last decades they have caught up almost in almost every sphere. In fact, women are the protagonists of increasing enrolment in tertiary education in many countries.

In addition to class divides, it is crucial to note that young people from minority groups or conditions of social exclusion seldom enrol in the most prestigious post-compulsory educational programmes. Moreover, these same youth disproportionately suffered the consequences of the latest crises (Arza Porras et al., 2020; Blustein et al., 2020; Ferrari, 2020; Korunovska & Jovanovic, 2020; O'Reilly et al., 2019). Not only has participation in a globalized economy led to the replacement of standard employment with precarious, diversified, flexible, destandardised and unpredictable careers (du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2004; Heinz, 2009; Pohl & Walther, 2007), making it difficult for young people to plan and coordinate the multiple transitions to adulthood and particularly to work, but neglect and discrimination have constrained the agency of these groups.

Functional diversity is at stake, too. Educational institutions have managed to overcome the barriers that traditionally curtailed the career prospects of students affected by very diverse types of impairments. However, their transitions are not yet fully equivalent to the trajectories of students who are not affected by these impairments.

In a nutshell, the special issue will investigate the transitions of disadvantaged lower-class and minority groups in order to learn about the circumstances of these individuals at the same time as enriching our knowledge about inequalities. A cross-cutting theme of the articles included in the issue is place, besides socioeconomic status. In fact, daily mobility, deprived neighbourhoods, physical barriers, local labour markets, and local education policies seem to make a great difference.

Paying attention to biographies

The biographies of students and recent graduates are a key frontier of research into STWTs. Biographies are associated with the trajectories that the related studies have normally analysed, as well as with the elaboration of meaningful life plans. Contrary to widespread belief, the contributors to this issue show that the correspondence of vocational education or tertiary education with employment opportunities is not the key obstacle to building sustainable systems of lifelong learning and education that facilitate smooth and satisfactory transitions. Their findings clearly highlight that such programmes are not always relevant for a number of reasons.

A strand of sociological research has convincingly argued that common assumptions about individual autonomy are undergoing deep and dramatic transformation. While autonomy has been considered a liberating force since the Enlightenment, in recent decades it has become a cultural imperative that forces everybody to develop their own project (Börner et al., 2020). This transformation has intermingled with the prevailing neoliberal ethos of public policies inasmuch as the

World Bank, the OECD, UNESCO, as well as many governments and very powerful think tanks have stressed the importance of the individualization of young people for tackling the challenges of transitions, thus weakening collective socialisation models and massively relying on self-responsibility (du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2004). The increase of individual responsibility has become masked by the use of keywords such as 'activation' or 'high aspiration' (Dahlstedt & Tesfahuney, 2010; Stahl, 2018) since many policies engage in a true '(re)orientation of hopes' (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017) that - it is claimed - should mould the biographies of young people to market demands (Lipman, 2004). These ideas have also resonated with recent reforms in Latin America, although STWTs face greater challenges due to the overwhelming prevalence of non-standard forms of employment on that continent (Roberti, 2018; Torres et al., 2021).

Similarly, there has been a prolongation and 'biographisation' of transitions in contexts that lack reliable collective patterns of working careers (Pohl & Walther, 2007). Young people are increasingly forced to 'invent adulthood' for themselves (Thomson et al., 2004), relying on their opportunity structure. Dwyer and colleagues (1999) speak of 'choice biographies' when describing the continuous movement between training, employment, unemployment, and adult and youth status - albeit one which involves some control over 'responsible risk management' in changing and uncertain contexts. However, Furlong (2009) has questioned the fallacious beliefs that lie behind some of these phenomena. Despite the fact that the protagonists themselves and the professionals who serve them may assume that youth trajectories respond mainly to personal decisions, research suggests that inequalities among social classes, genders, ethnic minorities and majorities and local spaces constrict young people's opportunities. This pressure is even greater when their social circumstances expose them to significant vulnerability related to their education, professional interests, urban environment, and health. The fallacy is even more striking in Latin America where a significant proportion of young people drop out of compulsory secondary education to contribute to family income through engagement with highly precarious jobs (D'Alessandre, 2017; Vendramini et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, research persistently points to the gap between 'slow and fast trackers' (Bynner & Parsons 2002), differentiating between lower-class and ethnic minority groups as opposed to the middle and higher class (du Bois-Reymond, 2009). In late modernity, those who 'voluntarily' choose shorter but insufficient education and training tracks run more risk of accessing precarious jobs than in earlier times, which, according to du Bois-Reymond (2009), is a more than evident manifestation of the re-standardization of work.

Noting the parallelism between the activation agenda and youth individualization experiences in the context of inequalities, STWT research has gradually explored the perspective of young people who engage with programmes designed to facilitate their transition. In Europe, Walther (2017) observed that these perspectives do not take into account the institutional differences between Scandinavian, Central European, and Southern countries. The protagonists take for granted the presence or absence of certain opportunities, and they elaborate interpretations of their biographies that often contradict official narratives. In Latin

America, research on the subjective dimension has revealed the family care responsibilities that many young people assume, the importance of interactions with professionals who apply different pedagogies, and the worrying incidence of violence in the lives of many young people (D' Alessandre, 2017; Jacinto, 2017).

It is therefore essential to take into account the perspective of young people, particularly of those who decide not to follow the rules of the labour market from a position of vulnerability, but instead choose to proactively negotiate alternative strategies rooted in their creativity, values, skills, and mobilisation of available capital (Stahl, 2018).

Life-course perspective

As Heinz (2009) claims, 'transitions' are socially and historically framed, rather than divided into normative sequences, particularly in a context where social change is restructuring all life phases. Diversity in this sense is richly illustrated by the articles in this Special Issue, not only among continents and countries, but also within them, crosscut by the main sociodemographic and institutional variables. Following Heinz (2009), the life-course perspective is defined by five interrelated principles: 1) Each life phase affects the entire life course (life-span development); 2) individuals actively construct their biography (human agency); 3) The life course is embedded in historical events (time and place); 4) Social circumstances and events influence transitions (timing of decisions); and, 5) Social relationships and networks contribute to the shaping of biographies: linked lives (2009, p. 4).

The contributors to the special issue reflect on these aspects of the life-course perspective using a biographical approach inasmuch as they aim to connect social time and space with informants' individual biographies, as well as to remain sensitive to decisive 'biographical turning points' (Walther, 2005) that affect all later decisions and outcomes. The de-standardisation of individual navigations among the contradictory demands of family, institutions, and the labour market, and the individual reconciliations of those demands are vividly illustrated by the SI articles. Reconciliations may mean apparently straight-line life-course development, but can also be produced through simultaneous dependency (e.g., cohabitation with parents) and autonomy (integration into the labour market, and family formation).

Navigation

An emerging feature in the majority of the articles of this SI is that they inquire into the intersection between agency, social forces, and change (Vigh, 2009), which some of them aptly describe using the metaphor of 'navigation' (e.g., Bereményi & Hellgren, 2022). As opposed to the 'pathway model' that emphasises structural forces, 'navigation models' highlight individuals' agency to act and skills to adapt (Furlong, 2013). From this perspective, navigation refers to the capacity of young people to move in uncertain and continuously changing circumstances across a 'troubled sea' (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2020). In a way, the idea of 'navigation' helps translate the 'abstract term of agency into the transition terminology' (Heinz, 2009, p. 7), denoting a chain of individual decisions and activities involving one's social pathways from one

life phase to another, connecting the actor to a variety of life spheres (Evans & Furlong 1997 in Heinz, 2009). The concept of ‘bounded agency’ focuses on young people’s capacity to act without losing the perspective of structuration. Evans (2007) speaks about a ‘socially situated agency’ that is influenced but not determined by environments as well as internalised frames of reference and external actions (2007, p. 93) - aspects that shape one’s navigation. Wyn (2009) attributes to those ‘internalised frames and external actions’ the concept of ‘self-navigation’; that is, a growing reliance on one’s own resources, and a reflexive capacity or consciousness in the context of institutional pathways and structures that do not tend to offer young people certainty and predictability (2009, p. 97). In Wyn’s view, consciousness should include an understanding of the nature of the social, economic, and political world and the complex network of relationships with others both locally and globally. ‘Being good navigators requires a more conscious approach to personal development so that all young people have the capacity to see how their personal biography (past) has developed and how it may be constructed (in the present) to maximize their options (for the future)’ (2009, p. 101). Pohl and Walther (2007) describe biographisation in a similar fashion. They call for an ‘ability to constantly assess and reflect on the balance between subjective interests or needs and external demands and possibilities and to integrate new experiences into a coherent learning biography’ (Pohl & Walther, 2007 drawing on Alheit & Dausien 2000).

However, the articles of this SI demonstrate that agency - in the form of navigation skills and consciousness - is deeply and unequally bounded and shaped by institutional, socioeconomic, and policy structures across different social groups, geographical areas, and historical moments. Consequently, becoming a good, self-reflexive, conscious navigator through present education systems and labour markets remains a privilege of the most fortunate. Alternatively, reflection without guidance may be built on individual self-blaming without recognising the systemic and institutional forces that force one to navigate in adverse circumstances, particularly in the context of repeated crises (Carrasco et al., 2018). In this vein, Appadurai (2004) links the symbol of navigation to aspiration in order to illustrate the unequal access of socioeconomically or otherwise unfavoured groups to recognition and redistribution (resources) (2004, p. 63). For this anthropologist, the capacity to aspire is a navigational capacity that is more developed among members of privileged social groups, as they can elaborate a deeper consciousness of the links between more and less immediate objects of aspiration, and have more complex experiences of the relation between a range of ends and means, as well as a larger stock of experience concerning how aspirations and outcomes are linked and how to navigate among them (2004, p. 68). To put it simply, less privileged groups lack the opportunity to practise their navigational capacity and hence to broaden and strengthen their aspirations (Bereményi, 2022).

Institutional and policy context in a time of crisis

Europe and Latin America are the geographical contexts of the special issue. We expect that the inclusion of this diversity of countries and places will greatly contribute to the cross-fertilisation of debates and research questions. However, a few

words on the recent socioeconomic transformations of these two continents during the last decade will certainly help to frame the theme. Although we cannot say much about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the following crises in the medium term, brief accounts of the consequences of the Great Recession are telling.

In Europe, the financial crisis of 2008 and the currency crisis of 2010 had a huge impact on young people. The effects were episodic in the Central European countries that maintained export-led growth and innovation systems despite financial and fiscal troubles, but were serious in the Southern European countries that implemented harsh economic policies of internal devaluation (Hall, 2014). Lower wages and more flexible regulation were introduced at the cost of young people, who suffered a much higher risk of unemployment than other age groups. In particular, data show that young people were hardest hit in Southern Europe, enduring very high rates of unemployment, temporary contracts, and NEET (not in employment, education, and training) status (Schoon & Bynner, 2020).

In Latin America, transitions from school to work are particularly uncertain because about half of the members of the labour force are not hired according to the terms of legal contracts. The huge share of informal work not only affects the wages and the incomes of graduates, but also hinders the potential of the job placements and internships associated with vocational and higher education programmes. For this reason, the expansion of social welfare and the initial success of fiscal and labour policies that fostered standard employment relationships were promising at the beginning of the decade (Martínez Franzoni & Sánchez-Alcolea, 2014). However, later political developments and economic conjunctures significantly weakened that initial success.

Special Issue contributions

This Special Issue hosts a range of interrelated articles from Europe and Latin America, centring on the school-to-work transition trajectories of vulnerable youth intimes of crisis.

Flores Morales & Rivermar-Pérez discuss the perverse logic of the globalised labour market that pushes Mexican youth who grow up in poverty in rural and urban areas to drop out of school and training to respond to short-term productive and reproductive family needs that ultimately trap them in an endless spiral of poverty. The authors sensitively describe how initial academic aspirations are modified by harsh economic circumstances into international and national migration or incorporation into precarious jobs.

Salas, González & Hernández's brilliant ethnographic report focuses on a different aspect in a similar context: the interaction between rural Mexican youth's everyday commuting to school and training and the gradual de-agrarianisation of the region under scrutiny. Here we observe navigations in accumulative unfavourable conditions by which weak but existing academic or training aspirations fade under the combined burden of paid and domestic work, commuting, and traditional social roles. These circumstances reproduce economic precarity.

The longitudinal qualitative study of Fernández, Fontdevila & Marsán enquires into young people's transitions following the Mexican model of dual training (MMDT), and particularly during the lockdown period associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors identify three different models of adaptation to the unforeseen situation. Students' socioeconomic condition is identified as a key variable that operates with respect to adaptation strategies. In this sense, MMDT, the aim of which is to compensate for educational inequalities in times of global crisis acts in the opposite direction by reinforcing social and educational inequalities. The dual-training model's main merit - its strong link with labour market stakeholders - does not seem to provide a solution in times of recession.

Corica, Otero & Merbilhaa's contribution, which draws on a longitudinal mixed-method study in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires in Argentina, observes how recent policy and institutional improvements affect the school-to-work transition of students from low-income families. Positive processes in the school system have helped sustain the academic- and training-related continuity of a broader student population; nevertheless, no improvements can be observed in labour market policies. The illustrative trajectories show that the labour market incorporation of poorer students is conditioned by labour market instability, precarity, and an observable disconnection between studies or training and available jobs.

The trajectories of six Argentinian young people after leaving technical-vocational secondary school are sensitively described by Jacinto, Roberti & Martínez, who illustrate the complex mix of sequences, motivations, and decisions shaped by structural conditions, particularly highlighting those of geographical-institutional context, gender, and economic, cultural, and social capitals. Based on interviews from 13 provinces, three contrasting typologies are defined: 'choice trajectories' with accumulated advantages; trajectories adjusted to emerging opportunities; and trajectories with accumulated disadvantages associated with very limited chances to choose.

While in all the previous articles academic and work-related aspirations are mentioned, Nada, Macedo, Teixeira & Araújo analyse the relation between the trajectories and aspirations of young early school leavers in a context of successive economic, political, and social crises in Portugal. The authors report that socioeconomic disadvantages tend to intensify. At a macro and meso level, the social hierarchy between academic and vocational paths, biased by social class and coupled with teachers' differentiated expectations, strongly conditions students' school-to-work transitions and corresponding aspirations. While the expected length of studies has increased in past decades, the gap between students from more affluent and disadvantaged families seems to have persisted, suggesting that Portuguese young people have interiorised in their personal aspirations the inequalities that mark their educational trajectories.

Similarly, Bereményi & Hellgren inquire into academic and occupational aspiration dilemmas of Roma young people in Spain through the concept of 'capacity to aspire' as navigational capacity. These authors' analytical life histories identify a

series of intermingled aspiration dilemmas such as concrete vs. abstract, misaligned and insecure, misrecognised, interrupted and postponed aspirations. Furthermore, they analyse Roma young people's capacity and strategies for navigating among aspiration-related resources and negotiating the meanings, terms, and conditions of aspiring school-to-work transitions under structural, institutional, and community pressures. It is also found that, in some circumstances, Roma young people can become active agents in negotiating the acknowledgement of their hopes within a 'hierarchy of aspirations'.

Researchers Tomaszewska-Pękała, Marchlik & Zubala investigate the 'lock-down generation' - that is, the impact of the latest educational reform in Poland on the opportunities of youth at risk of exclusion in terms of accessing the labour market. The authors find that the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced old inequalities and produced new ones. Drawing on interviews, they find that the lockdowns often interrupted on-the-spot training or company-based apprenticeships, and remote education increased the gap in the quality of education schools and companies could provide to students. 'Remote truancy' negatively impacted barely engaged students. Also, a lack of work experience increased their difficulty accessing employment or had a negative impact on their quality of employment. Recent educational reform, including earlier choice and a reduction of guidance, had a cumulatively adverse effect on young people at risk of educational exclusion and consequently on their labour market incorporation.

Calvo & Bayarri, differing from the authors of the previous articles, investigate non-formal, second chance, or alternative training and labour market inclusion programmes that target disengaged young people who have dropped out of education and training in Spain. Through life-stories of participants the article illustrates how young people once disconnected from school successfully re-engage. The authors describe these non-formal programmes as a resilient context perceived by young people as generating protective factors capable of compensating for risks and complexities in their life courses. As the former conclude, it is the structural precariousness of public training systems that follow neoliberal principles that justify the very existence and the relative success of these non-formal programmes.

Merino, Olmeda, Garcia & Palomares, drawing on a quantitative analysis, discuss the effect of Second Chance Schools (E2O) with respect to acquired competences and to either the school reengagement or labour market access of earlier dropouts in Spain. The article uncovers the main variables that contribute to E2O's success, such as the socioeconomic status of students, their previous school or training trajectory, age, and the completion of the entire planned learning route. Despite its descriptive character, this article is based on a survey filled in by almost 1,600 young people which perfectly complements Bayarri & Calvo's research on non-formal programmes for young Spanish dropouts.

Finally, Raquel Suriá pays attention to university students who are characterized by functional diversity and describes their expectations of labour market integration as well as their work efficiency. This interesting study unearths significant links between students' self-image and their employment strategies. However, the

fact that most of these students share very modest expectations indicates that functional diversity is a notable barrier that must be taken into consideration at the same time as socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity.

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