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Young Apprentices' Critical Perspectives on the Curriculum of Portuguese Apprenticeship Courses

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Abstract

Context: The paper focuses on young apprentices' perspectives on the curricula of a Portuguese IVET pathway, the apprenticeship courses (AC). AC provide an EQF level 4 certificate, and a diploma equivalent to upper secondary education (12th grade). The paper discusses the implications of the devaluation of the curricula on the social image of IVET in the Portuguese context.

Methods: A qualitative approach was used to analyse data from semi-structured interviews with 54 young apprentices attending apprenticeship courses in nine training entities in northern Portugal.

Results: Young apprentices refer to the curricula of the sociocultural, scientific and technological components of AC in distinct ways. The first two are classified as simplified and summarised, without much value to apply to the work context. The subjects are levelled down to the level of lower secondary education, that young apprentices attended before enrolling in AC. The technological component is seen as useful and demanding, although young apprentices also point out that it should be more practical and that some subjects need to be updated. This component is valued because the apprentices find a linear application of their knowledge to the work context.

Conclusion: The epithet of 'easiness' attributed to AC curricula, and to Portuguese IVET in general, contributes to a negative social image of IVET, as it is echoed to society. This label can also contribute to young apprentices feeling socially disregarded. Improving the level of the knowledge of the AC curriculum would contribute to improving the social image of these courses and of IVET in general.

Keywords

apprenticeship courses, apprentices, Portugal, curriculum

1 Introduction

Portuguese apprenticeship courses (AC) are a modality of initial vocational education and training (IVET) in the Portuguese VET system. As in other VET systems around the world (Lehmann et al., 2014; Ryan & Lőrinc, 2018), Portuguese IVET is subject to stigma (Doroftei, 2020; Torres & Araújo, 2010). The social image of IVET is deeply rooted in the divide between theoretical and practical knowledge (Hyland, 2017; Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2019), the latter being considered less noble (Hyland, 2017; Lehmann et al., 2014) and accessible to all learners, while the former is associated with intellect and culture and therefore not accessible to all learners



(Hyland, 2017; Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2019). The former, associated with IVET, is considered easy, while the latter, associated with mainstream education, is considered difficult to learn (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2019). Consequently, the social image of IVET is linked to the social perception that the knowledge conveyed in the curriculum is easy and, subsequently, IVET is attended by young people who were not able to succeed in mainstream education.

Alternative contexts to mainstream education can provide “meaningful education” (McGregor et al., 2015) for young people who have become disengaged from school at some point in their lives, as we have argued elsewhere (Macedo et al., 2018). In those contexts, young people can rediscover their motivation to learn, rebuild their relationship with knowledge (Charlot, 2009) and experience that learning can be translated into skills, knowledge and even self-esteem. However, meaningful education must go hand in hand with opportunities for further study, in particular in higher education. It must also contribute to the development of an analytical sense of the world, including all the dimensions of the profession for which one is being trained.

This paper aims to present the perspectives of young apprentices on the curricula of Portuguese AC, and discuss them within the scope of the concepts of “meaningful education” (McGregor et al., 2014) and “powerful knowledge” (Young et al., 2014). Since IVET students are the main target of the stigma surrounding IVET (Doroftei, 2020), it is relevant to know their perceptions and opinions about the curricula.

2 Theoretical framework

The concepts of “meaningful education” (McGregor et al., 2015) and “powerful knowledge” (Young et al., 2014) were used to supporting the analysis of the data. The concept of meaningful education refers to programmes that are close to students’ lives in the sense that they involve pedagogical experiences that combine theory and practice (McGregor et al., 2015). “Powerful knowledge” (Young et al., 2014) is knowledge that is generalisable and that applies to all dimensions of life, but, as the authors argue, it can only be imparted at school. It enables individuals to become more aware of the mechanisms of power to which they are subject. The authors contend that what they call “powerful knowledge”, is a necessary dimension for the existence of social justice.

Powerful knowledge can only be imparted at school because Young and colleagues (2014, p.10) believe that school is the place where all students can “acquire knowledge that takes them beyond their experience”. This conception of knowledge shared by Young and colleagues (2014) seems to be conflicting with the conception of a meaningful education defended by McGregor and colleagues (2015). The former focus on conceptualisations and content that enable students to know and think about the world beyond their concrete lives. The latter focus on building programmes that students can understand from their life experiences.

Promoting meaningful education does not necessarily mean that powerful knowledge cannot be fostered. It is possible to start from students’ life experiences and provide them with knowledge that allows them to reconceptualise and move beyond their life experiences. Yet, promoting meaningful education can be understood as adapting the curriculum to the kind of students attending a particular programme, which seems to be the case in AC. Tailoring the curriculum to specific groups, based on a preconception of their abilities, can limit the aspirations, expectations and development of those included in the groups. This contributes to social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, n.d.), because it does not stimulate the overcoming of the limitations implied by a “non-schooling” culture (Young, 2015).

The curricula of Portuguese apprenticeship courses is composed by four components: Sociocultural (subjects like languages, ICT and Personal Development), Scientific (subjects like Mathematics, Law, Economics, Chemistry), Technological (subjects specific of the professional area), and Practical (work-based training). Although the AC provide a certificate

of equivalence to upper secondary education (12th grade), the curricular content of the sociocultural and scientific components, which should be equivalent to mainstream education, is levelled down to the level of lower secondary education. This levelling down means that young people who complete the 12th grade through the AC are not in an equal condition in terms of knowledge as those complete 12th grade through mainstream education. At the same time, this levelling down seems to have an underlying social representation of the young people who attend these courses as being unable to follow “a ‘normal’ curriculum” (Alves, 2007). This is a representation that contributes to the categorisation of vocational education as an ‘easier’ educational pathway. This is reflected in its social image, in its attractiveness (Cedefop, 2014), and, consequently, in the representations about the students who attend it.

3 Methods

The research presented here stems from a larger mixed-methods study, on the social image of initial vocational education and training in Portugal.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four groups of stakeholders in nine training entities offering apprenticeship courses in the North of Portugal. However, for the purpose of this paper, 54 semi-structured interviews with young apprentices (61% male) who were attending AC at the time of data collection are considered. The young apprentices who participated in the study were selected by the directors of the training entities according to the criteria defined by the researcher. The 54 young apprentices interviewed, six per training entity, were attending 23 different AC, corresponding to 16 areas of education and training.

The analysis presented in this paper focuses on the perspectives of young apprentices on the knowledge provided by the courses. The research question underlying the paper is: *what are the perspectives of AC students on the knowledge conveyed by AC curricula?*

Findings are derived from content analysis (Tonkiss, 2004) using the NVivo 12® software. Data were coded in a parent code: *Perspective on the knowledge in the AC*, and in a child code: *Opinion on the AC curriculum*. An inductive analysis was performed on the content of the child code, resulting in the categories shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Opinion on the AC curriculum

Codes	Number of References
Subjects are simplified or summarised	62
Subjects are different from mainstream education	12
It should be more practical and less theoretical	12
The technological component is very useful and demanding	9
One learns more in the course than in mainstream education	5
Subjects are interconnected	5
Subjects have applicability in real life	4
There are subjects that are not useful for the profession	3
We learn more by doing than by listening	2
It does not prepare us to practise a profession autonomously	2
Here we are prepared for a profession, at school to be somebody	1
There is overlap of content between subjects	1
There are subjects missing from the technological component	1
There are subjects that are obsolete; they no longer make sense	1
On the course we learn more in practical terms	1
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Triangulation of the analysis of the opinion on the AC curriculum was made with a code about the negative perspectives that young apprentices infer about the society's social representations on IVET. Table 2 presents the five child codes with higher number of references coded at the codes: Social image of IVET – representations from society / negative perspectives / micro level. The micro level code reports to the references directly related with IVET students.

Table 2

Negative perspectives on the social image of IVET – Micro level

Codes	Number of references
It is for dumb people; who do not succeed in mainstream education	26
For young people who are not interested in school; who do not want to study	6
For young people who don't want to do anything; lazy	5
For young people without support at home; disadvantaged	4
For young people who fail and do not succeed at school	3

The study was in accordance with the ethical regulations of the researcher's University. Informed consent was given to the participants and signed by all.

4 Results

Young apprentices were asked about their opinion on the curricula of AC. Table 1 gathers the categories emerged from their perspectives. The following reports to each of those categories.

Subjects are simplified or summarised

As denoted in Table 1, young apprentices report most frequently (62 references) the easiness of the subjects that compose the sociocultural and scientific components of the AC curricula. The following excerpt from Laura's interview illustrates this perception:

I: What do you think about what is learned in the AC, the subjects, or... the contents?

Laura: They are subjects that are easier, that is, they are easier than in mainstream education, which is really for us to get good grades and have a good mean at the end. They're very easy subjects.

I: And do you think that's good or bad?

Laura: It's a bit bad, too. It's good for us, because we can get high grades, but it's bad because in the future... if someone asks us for more elaborate things, we don't know how to do them, right?

I: But you're talking about what subjects, for example?

Laura: Like Maths... we're in grade 11, we don't have 11th grade material, we're taking 7th, 8th or 9th grade material... we're taking very basic subjects. In terms of... Portuguese, we also don't have very... in-depth subjects, right? It's more basic subjects, it's always like that, those subjects that are more... mathematics, English or something, they are also very easy subjects. (Laura, F, 22 years old, 11th grade of Hospitality and Catering)

Laura's interview suggests that the subjects she mentions form part of the sociocultural and the scientific components of AC curricula. Laura's vision is reinforced by Nair, in the same grade, but a different area of education and training:

The subjects... I feel are basic on the verge of mainstream secondary school. Because... I used to get negative grades in English and here I get 20s. It has nothing to do with it! I think it also has something to do with age, because before I was younger, maybe I didn't care so much, but... I think the subjects help us in many ways, but they are easier and more... you don't need a lot of study to be on a course like we are. (Nair, F, 22 years old, 11th grade of Craftwork)

Nair mentions the learning maturity of young apprentices, suggesting that she wasn't mature enough to get a good grade in English before the AC, carrying to herself a kind of 'guilt' for not being a good learner. But she went from a negative grade to the highest grade possible and still finds she feels the subjects very basic.

Subjects are different from mainstream education

The excerpts from Laura and Nair suggest that young apprentices are aware of the differences between the subjects in AC curricula and those in mainstream education (12 references). This may be due to the fact that some of the interviewees have attended mainstream upper secondary education. Others who haven't had that experience also perceive it, but from the testimonies of colleagues, as Fernando mentions:

I finished the 9th grade, I had no other experience, I don't know what mainstream education is like in the 10th, 11th, 12th grades, but from what they say it's a bit easier here, the subjects are different, but you can still learn something. But for example, we have equivalency for the 12th grade and then we can take exams to apply for university... we no longer have... the subject we learn is not compatible with what we need to go to university. (Fernando, M, 17 years old, 12th grade of Metallurgy and Metalomechanics)

Therefore, students report that the subjects they learn in AC, that should be equivalent to those in mainstream education, are different and also simplified, which means 'easier' than in mainstream education. This position is also related to the perception that there are subjects in AC *that are not useful for the profession* (3 references). Usually, these subjects are the ones from the sociocultural component.

It should be more practical and less theoretical

Young apprentices are aware that the sociocultural subjects are part of the AC curricula because of their equivalence to upper secondary education. However, as young apprentices do not find a real equivalence, they claim that the hours spent on sociocultural subjects should be transferred to the technological component, which is the one that is more linearly connected to on-the-job training. Leonardo, for example, highlights this by mentioning not knowing enough to work:

We have to have socio-cultural subjects because of the equivalence for secondary school, but in practice this doesn't happen, does it? Because the subjects we have are not at all equivalent to what we teach in secondary school, far from it! So, we could have many more hours of technical subjects, which we really need! Because... my course has a lot of things to know and we don't give a tenth of what we need to go to work! So, I think, perhaps, either the number of hours of some socio-cultural subjects should be reduced, or they should not be given at all, or... I don't know, I think it's a waste of time. We are in the internship and we feel that we don't know how to do anything! And yet we have given a lot of things here and it's still not enough! (Leonardo, M, 22 years old, 11th grade of Textile, Clothing, Footwear and Leather Industries)

As a result of this feeling of unpreparedness, young apprentices believe that the knowledge they learn in the course does *not prepare to practise a profession autonomously* (2 references).

The technological component is very useful and demanding

In contrast to the 'easiness' of the sociocultural and scientific components, young apprentices report that the technological component is useful and demanding, especially because of its applicability to the work context.

The subjects that are linked to the course, the more technical ones, I think they are very... worthwhile, right?... because then we go to the internship, we go to work and we have the knowledge we have learned here. Of course, there are subjects that we won't use in the world of work... those subjects that are more... that are compulsory. But those more practical ones are very useful. (António, M, 25 years old, 11th grade of Trade)

Despite the importance that students attribute to the technological component, they also point out that some of the subjects they learn in class are already outdated in the work context and need to be updated.

In sum, when asked for their opinion on the AC curriculum, students generally describe it as being easy. They tend to devalue the sociocultural and scientific components of the curriculum because the subjects that compose it are levelled by lower secondary education, which students have already studied up to the 9th grade. In contrast, they tend to value the technological component as it is the one where they perceive a linear application to the work context. Nevertheless, they claim that the latter component should have more teaching hours, be more practical, and updated.

Young apprentices were also asked about their perceptions of what society thinks about the courses and about IVET students. In the following we refer to the first two categories in Table 2.

It is for dumb people; who do not succeed in mainstream education

As can be seen in Table 2, the code with the largest number of references (26 references) reports that young apprentices perceive that society thinks that IVET students are 'dumb' and that they had to enrol in vocational education because they could not succeed in mainstream education, as Raquel states:

I sometimes hear comments such as "ah, those who go to the vocational course are also a bit dumb" because they don't have the skills to go to an upper secondary course. (Raquel, F, 20 years old, 12th grade of Beauty Care)

However, young apprentices perceive the connection between this social representation and the curricula of AC, as Patrícia's words make clear:

According to what people think, it's for dummies, isn't it? the courses, so to speak. I wouldn't say it's for dummies, but... also myself, who've been in both types of education, I think that it really demands a lot less of people... not a lot less, but... less. It's easier to do. (Patrícia, F, 23 years old, 11th grade of Textile, Clothing, Footwear and Leather Industries)

Thus, young apprentices feel that society has a negative opinion of IVET students (young apprentices included), namely considering that vocational education is *for young people who are not interested in school; who do not want to study*, as Yara asserts:

Unfortunately, I think that society in general thinks that people are here because they don't want to study and want life to be easier, and that's it. (Yara, F, 21 years old, 12th grade of Hospitality and Catering)

These findings suggest that young apprentices' perceptions of the curricula are closely related to the social representations they perceive from society. Their perceptions about the curricula

are likely to reflect the same perceptions that society has, leading to a negative social representation of IVET¹.

5 Conclusions

The sociocultural and scientific components of the Apprenticeship Courses curricula are characterised by a very low academic level comparable to that of lower secondary education. This levelling down could be seen as proxy to ‘meaningful education’ programmes that are close to students’ lives (McGregor et al, 2015). However, it could also affect the ability to read and interpret the world and the critical sense that goes beyond the limits of their professionalisation (Nussbaum, 2014; Young, 2016; Young et al., 2014). Moreover, it may also limit the full acquisition of key competences for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2019) which are considered fundamental for personal and professional development. However, it seems that students only assign value to knowledge that they can perceive as linearly applicable to the profession for which they are being trained. This is in line with the work of Hiim (2017) that mentions that Norwegian VET students do not see the connection between the subjects and the vocational field they are being trained for.

Notwithstanding, the epithet of ‘easiness’ attributed to AC curricula, and to Portuguese IVET in general, gives rise to a negative social image of IVET, as this labelling is echoed to society.

The level of curricular demands in the AC can create a self-fulfilling prophecy effect in the young apprentices in the sense that they feel incapable and also socially disregarded. This situation is in line with Clavel’s (2004, p. 113) statement that “disadvantaged populations are subjected to a pedagogical work whose purpose is to internalise the legitimisation of their exclusion”, assimilating an idea of “inaptitude” (*ibidem*) to follow the “normal” curriculum (Alves, 2007).

Therefore, fostering ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young et al, 2014) in IVET – meaning improving the level of the knowledge of the AC curriculum, and levelling it by upper secondary education – would contribute to improving the social image of these courses and of IVET in general. It could also contribute to the empowerment of AC students and to a greater parity of esteem between vocational and mainstream education (Cedefop, 2014).

Ethics statement

This paper results from a doctoral study conducted from 2015 to 2020. At the time there was no ethics committee at FPCEUP, therefore, the research has not an ethics approval or opinion from an ethics committee. Nevertheless, the supervisors of the doctoral research project have approved the ethics principles guiding the research.

The participants were given an informed consent document which included: 1) a presentation of the research project and its main objectives; 2) the interview topics; 3) the express request for audio recording, ensuring that the data collected would only be used for this research and would not be passed on to third parties in raw form; 4) information that a code would be assigned to each participant and each training entity they attended, and that all identifying elements would be removed from the transcript, thus ensuring anonymity; 5) information that the participants could leave the study at any time without any detriment; 6) and an indication that the results would be published. The consent also included the researcher's

¹ AC are a specific modality of Portuguese IVET system, and not the most representative, but, as the study showed, people, including those who participate in IVET do not distinguish between training modalities. Thus, when asked about the social representations around the courses, young apprentices reported to IVET in general.

contact details. Before the interview the informed consent was explained orally to the participants, who were then asked of the subsistence of any doubts. The document was then read for signature. The demographic data of the participants were collected in a separate document, without names, where only the codes were mentioned. The participants were given a alias that did not match any of their real names. Another ethical option, related to the participants' anonymity, was to not indicate the title of the apprenticeship courses the participants attended. The designation of the corresponding education and training areas which aggregate more than one apprenticeship course was used instead. This reduced the possibility of identifying the courses and, therefore, the participants.

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Biographical note

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