

## Adulthood transition of students with special educational needs in Portugal: Preliminary results of professionals perceptions

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### Abstract

**Purpose of study:** This paper presents preliminary results of a study that aims to understand the transition process (TP) delivered at schools for students with special educational needs (SEN).

**Methods:** A questionnaire was developed taking into account the following dimensions: Professional performance; TP of students with SEN, adaptations in the learning process, training pathways and TP in the labour market. Participants were 616 teachers who work in the TP.

**Findings and results:** Results demonstrate that there should exist closer links between schools and the community; the existing training pathways are more directed to mild SEN, and the majority of the teachers agree that there should be more local business community's awareness to include these students as potential employees.

**Conclusions and recommendations:** Conclusions of this study illustrate that the access of these students to appropriate training can be fundamental in promoting professional qualification and inclusion of students with SEN.

**Keywords:** Transition process, individual transition plan, special educational needs.

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## **1. Introduction**

With the recent extension of compulsory education, in Portugal, up to 12 or 18 years old, the frequency of providing education and training institutions, transition to adulthood of students with special educational needs (SEN) requires discontinuities in the time we live in and the current education system. We hope, therefore, that the product resulting from our research provides some answers to the objectives of our study, such as for the transition to active life, students with special needs assume a substantive importance that lead to full citizenship for people with disabilities.

The adulthood transition of students with SEN extends more and more in different stages of life, which should facilitate the acquisition of general, professional or vocational skills (Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell & Devecchi, 2013). Once that, nowadays, the formal system of education/training for students with SEN extends more and more in different stages of life, which must provide the acquisition of general and vocational skills.

This issue takes an extremely current character, concerning the importance of lining and the interest in sharing the questions related to training, qualifications and employment of young people with SEN.

So, the role of the school as an institution is critical in the operation of the entire process, both inside and outside their premises, providing activities and experiences that enhance the student by establishing protocols and training agreements; thus, assuming an intermediary role, where the young man begins a journey of professional learning and even helping him to define his Life Project.

However, all the course of action should be a partnership that embraces the person with special needs, their family, the local services, the school community and elements of government teams that support the transition from youth to adulthood, assuming the school a leadership position requiring that all stakeholders to participate proactively, sharing responsibilities leading to the success.

Underlining some international perspectives that could reflect the situation in Portugal, (Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Swedeen & Owens, 2010), arguing that research indicates that during basic education, a substantial number of young people with SEN have limited access to career development activities with quality. The work experience or vocational training, which has been enjoyed by young people during their school career, plays a central role in shaping the career progression that will achieve results during adulthood (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006).

Regarding the supports implicated, the major part of technicians involved in the transition report have few natural partners in order to support and strengthen these community experiences (Carter et al., 2009).

## **2. Methods**

### ***2.1. Methodological approach***

This research study is designed taking into account a quantitative methodological approach. A questionnaire was distributed in the country, and data were collected in a single moment, it may classify our research as cross-sectional study such defined by (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) who stated that 'a cross-sectional study is that one which produces an instant photograph of the population at a given moment'.

### ***2.2. Purpose of study***

This paper presents a study that aims to understand the transition process (TP) of students with (SEN) in Portugal. Therefore, our research consists of studying how the school is organised to comply

with the regulatory constant of the Law No. 3/2008 which recommends that ‘all young people with SEN to permanently benefit from a proper process of TVA’, since the most obvious concerns that arise in the intervention of adolescents with SEN process is the transition to adulthood and subsequent integration into the labour market.

In this perspective, we believe that our research beyond may be a contribution in conceptual and empirics terms and in respect, the study of the TA of students with SEN to further contribute to scale out, frame the training offers as effective proposals for these students in order for their integration into the labour market.

### **2.3. Research questions**

In this case, the investigation aimed to study how the school is organised to comply with the regulatory constant of Decree Law No. 3/2008 (2008) which recommends that ‘all young people with SEN should benefit from a permanent and appropriate TP’, once the most obvious concerns that arise in the intervention of adolescents with SEN process is the transition to adulthood and subsequent integration into the labour market.

The main problem issues will focus on:

- i To understand what principles and practices of schools with regard to education and transition for students with SEN.
- ii To understand whether a relationship exists between the principles and practices adopted by schools and the degree of organisation and systematisation that face their TPs.

### **2.4. Sample**

Once our study wants to compare type of existing responses in Portugal which was implemented at national level, in order to get an overall ‘picture’ of how legal norms are being implemented in our country, and in what direction the school and community provides conditions for the transition of students with SEN to the job effectively contribute to its implementation.

Our sample is based on professionals who intervene in the adulthood process of transition to the adult life of students with SEN, based on a prior stratification and obtaining random that allows the generalisation of results (Almeida & Freire, 2008) .In this sense, for sample selection, we used the sampling stratified since the study covered a larger sample population, with several variables, making it necessary to determine the number of elements, in order to obtain a sample that will be representative, in order to allow the possible generalisation of the results.

The sample consisted of 616 teachers (see Figure 1), spread across all the Portuguese regions which intervened in the TP as education/training courses teachers, as special education responsible for the implementation of individual transition programmes and monitors and the technicians in institutions.



**Figure 1. Sample distribution**

### 2.5. Instruments

In our case, with the aim to measure attitudes, opinions, perceptions about the TP of SEN students, we developed a questionnaire, where most of the questions were based on a Likert scale, appropriate for measuring attitudes and perceptions (DeVellis, 2012). In either situation, the followed criteria to a valid construct were: the significance of the information that could be collected; building unequivocal utterances, the readiness of responses and the adequacy to the population to which they were relate.

The questionnaire was distributed, via online and printed, and applied to 616 professionals working on schools, institutions, etc., who work within the TP. The questionnaire with 50 items was developed according to five dimensions, such as professional performance; TP of students with SEN, adaptations in the learning process for these students, training pathways and TP in relation to the labour market.

### 3. Findings and Results

Regarding our research proposals, the choice of appropriate statistical treatment is necessary and important to identify the type of variable and the respective measurement scale. Thus, it is fundamental in planning what kind of variables we want (Table 1), to know in advance what the statistical evidence that we can apply. It is clear that quantitative variables are better than merely ordinal, because they include more information and they are likely to be applied in more powerful statistical tests (Punch, 2006).

Table 1. Description of studied variables

Study variables
Age
Academic background
Functions in this school year
Service time <sup>†</sup>
Type of educational establishment
Professional experience in academic context
Professional experience in professional/training context
Training areas offered by the schools

<sup>†</sup>until 31/08/2013

After the first statistics analysis, and according to the preliminary results of the survey sample that consisted of 616 teachers/coaches and monitors various parts of the country, which intervened in the transition to the active life of young people with SEN, some important considerations may be established regarding the socio-demographic characterisation of the sample participants (Table 1).

Table 2. Socio-demographic characterisation of the sample

	Sample	n	%
Gender	Male	149	19%
	Female	467	81%
Age	(20 a 29)	29	4,7%
	(30 a 39).	165	26,8%
	(40 a 49).	246	39,9%
	(+50)	176	28,6%
	Bachelor	3	0,5%
Academic Background	Graduate	207	33,6%
	CESE	31	5%
	Postgraduate Specialization course	171	27,8%
	Academic Master	180	29,2%
	PhD	22	3,6%
	Other	2	0,3%
	Second cycle Teacher	78	12,7%
	Third cycle Teacher	144	23,4%
Functions in this school year	Specialized Technician	36	5,8%
	Class Monitor	4	0,6%
	Class Director	67	10,9%
	Technical Pedagogical Director	15	2,4%
	Special Educations Teacher	273	44,3%
	Series Coordinator	4	0,6%
	Department Coordinator	48	7,8%
	Course Coordinator	11	1,8%
	Other	73	11,9%
	Service Time	(5)	78
(10)		81	13,1%
(15)		124	20,1%
(20)		155	25,2%
(+25)		178	28,9%
Type of Educational establishment	Public education School	544	88,3%
	Private and cooperative School	46	7,5%
	Vocational Training Centers of the IEFP	9	1,5%
	Other training entities	17	2,8%

According to the sample that responded to the survey, based on a descriptive analysis, some considerations can be made:

- i Of the 616 respondents professionals, 467 (81%) were female gender and 149 (19%) were male gender, with an age range between 40 and 49 years old.
- ii As for the length of professional experience, participants have since 5 years by more than 25years career.
- iii With regard to academic training, participants have qualifications that fall from the bachelor to the PhD, the majority (65.5%) owns the undergraduate degree.

- iv In terms of your professional experience, mostly professionals exert Special education teacher’s function (44.3%).
- v For the type of establishment where they exercise their professional activity, the vast majority of sample elements of reporting (88.3%) carrying out their profession in the public establishments.

Comparatively and what concerns ‘professional experience versus training context’, (Table 3), some information could be retreat, after table analysis:

Table 3. Professional experience versus training context

		Problematic	n	%
Professional Experience	a) Students/trainees to frequent exclusively in academic context	Autism Spectrum Disorders	280	46,6%
		Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	398	66,2%
		Hearing deficiency	112	18,6%
		Emotional and Behavioral Disorders	370	61,6%
		Specific Learning Disabilities	399	66,4%
		Intellectuals Disabilities	391	65,1%
		Motor Disabilities	247	41,1%
		Visual Disabilities	120	20,0%
		Communication Problems	220	36,6%
		Other Health Issues	81	13,5%
		Others	37	
	b) Students/trainees to frequent professional training context	Autism Spectrum Disorders	133	21,6%
		Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	252	40,9%
		Hearing deficiency	58	9,4%
		Emotional and Behavioral Disorders	259	42,0%
		Specific Learning Disabilities	264	42,9%
		Intellectuals Disabilities	353	57,3%
		Motor Disabilities	120	19,5%
		Visual Disabilities	51	8,3%
		Communication Problems	99	16,1%
Other Health Issues	53	8,6%		
Others	23			

- i For professional experience versus offering training regarding inquiries with ‘professional experience with students/trainees attending exclusively in academic context’, specific learning disabilities is assumed as the most common problem (66.4%).
- ii By comparison, in the professional experience with students/trainees attending in vocational training context item, the most obvious problems are the intellectual difficulties with (57.3%).
- iii To summarise preliminary descriptive results, obtained data are presented, illustrating that in the several dimensions of the questionnaire, some aspects highlights already at first sight:
- iv The majority of the participants (68.1%) believe that ‘there should be closer links between schools and businesses’.
- v Regarding to training pathways, 26.4% of the participants think that the courses of education and training (offered in Portugal for these students) are more directed to mild SEN.
- vi In relation to the individual transition plan (ITP), 43.6% of respondents highlighted the need for students to have an active part in the process of the ITP, which must provide professional and behavioural competencies (42.2%).
- vii Regarding the TP dimension in relation to the labour market, 78.3% of the participants agree that there should be more local business community’s awareness to include these students as potential employees.

viii In the same way, 33.7% of the participants agree that the TP assesses interests, desires, motivations, skills, attitudes and abilities of the young person with the requirements for a future job of students with SEN.

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

As a conclusion of this preliminary study, and based on these results, it can be stated that the access of all young people with any kind of practical training provides a set of resources and opportunities that can be instrumental in promoting good professional and social inclusion of students with SEN.

In the same way, 33.7% of the participants agree that the TP assesses interests, desires, motivations, skills, attitudes and abilities of the young person with the requirements for a future job of students with SEN.

After reviewing the preliminary results, since our intention is to understand the perceptions and opinions expressed by the professionals on training/training courses in the Portuguese education system as effective proposals for these students, with a view to inclusion in the Market place work, it can be inferred that the majority of respondents are mostly linked to the special education area.

Trying to understand how the school is organised, and what answers and educational resources deployed in the TP of these students, the majority of respondents believe that the public school must assume the leading role in the process.

Trying to understand how the school is organised, and what answers and educational resources are deployed in Transition to adult life of these students, the majority of respondents believe that the public school must assume the leading role in the process. However, it reveals the need for a more structured development of inter-institutional collaboration in the TP in order to facilitate greater participation and cooperation of the community in general to the difficulties of professional/social integration of a young woman with SEN rethinking this path importance of our practice as educational professionals.

Finally, after the complete data analysis, our intention is to extrapolate the opinions and generalisations, in the national context, the population of students with SEN and the school community involved in the TP, in order to sensitise the community at large to the difficulties of professional/social integration of a young man with SEN rethinking the importance of our practices as education professionals as well as methodologies and different strategies, so that we can maximise the full potential of development of these young people.

As a conclusion of this study, and based on these results, it can be stated that the access of all young people with any kind of practical training provides a set of resources and opportunities that can be instrumental in promoting good professional and social inclusion of students with SEN.

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