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RESEARCH ARTICLE



'No time for dreams': young adults' educational expectations and aspirations

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ABSTRACT

Background: In Europe's current socioeconomic and educational landscape of economic volatility, intensified by global events like COVID19, conflicts and societal barriers, new generations face a clash between their aspirations, and expectations. This tension is stark in countries like Portugal, where poverty and inequality persist, and educational attainment remains low despite progress. Housing insecurity, precarious employment, and limited career prospects have reshaped what is achievable, making social citizenship rights such as stable employment, emotional stability, and parenthood elusive.

Purpose: This article draws on the concepts of Bourdieu's capital, Yosso's 'aspirational capital', and Moensted's 'social citizenship aspiration' to explore how structural factors intersect with individual agency. It examines the (mis)alignment between young adults' educational aspirations and expectations, asking two research questions: 1) What are the educational and occupational aspirations of young Portuguese adults at risk of leaving education early? 2) How do structural factors shape these young adults' possibility to aspire and to pursue futures they have reason to value?

Methods: Drawing on 24 qualitative face-to-face interviews with Portuguese young adults aged 17–24, from early school leavers to those in mainstream and vocational education, this study uncovers the diverse paths they consider.

Findings: Young adults' educational aspirations and expectations often converge, with many unable to envision a future beyond basic survival. Previously attainable goals such as stable employment or parenthood seem distant; limited prospects accelerate school disengagement and push young adults into precarious labour markets. Three distinct perspectives emerged: pragmatic views prioritising employment prospects; disillusioned views regarding education's transformative potential; and hopeful perspectives seeing education as a potential enabler of social mobility.

Conclusions: For the young adults in our study, fundamental citizenship rights had been transformed into aspirational goals. This suggests that, to ensure young adults can pursue fulfilling lives, policymakers and educators must address structural barriers linked to the connection between education and labour markets, and the influence of socioeconomic conditions in shaping aspirational capacities.

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Introduction

Within a context of global economic crises, labour market precarity, and increasingly fragmented transitions to adulthood, today's youth negotiate an uncertain set of opportunities, where the alignment between aspirations and expectations is increasingly complex. Understanding aspirations is relevant to education and social inclusion policy and research, for several reasons.

First, it allows us to understand the disruption of traditional pathways to adulthood – the challenge of 'new adulthood' (Wyn et al. 2020, 1). Historically, young people have had a clearer sense of what they can aspire to, but according to J. Laughland-Booÿ, M. Mayall, and Z. Skrbis̃ (2015, 588) 'this sense of security has disappeared'. This makes it difficult to 'predict school achievement on the grounds of aspirations or vice versa' (Khattab 2015, 731). The alignment between high aspirations, high school achievement, and good jobs is increasingly questionable (Gorard, See, and Davies 2012). Both J. Bessant, R. Farthing, and R. Watts (2017) and Chesters et al. (2019) argue that neoliberal economic policies – aimed at enhancing national economic competitiveness and labour market flexibility – have undermined the stable employment pathways and welfare structures that supported previous generations' transitions to adulthood. Additionally, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent geopolitical tensions, the current generation is experiencing profound inequalities, exclusion, and, sometimes, the feeling of a dreamless future (Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2019). As Cuervo et al. (2023) highlight, the pandemic intensified existing patterns of employment liminality – an in-betweenness characterised by ambiguity and flux – that many young adults have already assumed as the standard of their working lives.

Second, understanding aspirations helps us to rethink 'inclusive' and equity education policies. Low aspiration is often framed as a 'deficit' held by certain demographic groups – in particular, working-class youth (Burke 2015) Boxer et al. (2011, 615). note that students who perceive educational achievement as infeasible tend to report 'higher levels of social and academic risks'. Despite this assertion that working-class youth often exhibit limited aspirations, other research indicates that, across social class, gender, and race, young adults generally hold high aspirations and aim for professional careers (Allen and Hollingworth 2013; Archer, DeWitt, and Wong 2014). This finding, while encouraging on one level, is argued by some to veil the influence of meso and macro conditions in young adults' lives and decisions. Consequently 'raising aspirations' discourse and programmes are criticised as rhetoric that ignores structural and resource barriers (St Clair and Benjamin 2011; Nada et al. 2020), thereby placing undue responsibility on individuals and their families, impacting self-perception, self-realisation, and societal expectations within education. Drawing on Hawkins (2017), we ask the following question: Do aspirations matter if there is no cultural or economic capacity to fulfil them? This suggests that a broader and more inclusive approach that addresses systemic barriers – such as economic inequality, limited access to resources and institutional discrimination – is necessary if young adults' aspirations are to be realised. It is also important to acknowledge that young adults are active and may recognise, critique, and transgress the constraints they face (Threadgold 2020). Building on this understanding of youth agency, Berlant's (2011) 'cruel optimism' scholarship reveals that young adults often develop sophisticated

awareness of the contradictions between institutional promises and actual opportunities available to them.

Third, understanding aspirations is relevant to youth citizenship and social policy. Moensted's (2021) conceptualisation of *social citizenship aspiration* encompasses both rights/entitlements to welfare benefits, and active participation in society through access to meaningful employment, housing security, and forming and sustaining families and relationships. Similarly, for Wood (2022), youth citizenship operates at the intersection of 'becoming, being and doing', where the young adult navigates liminal spaces between constraints and possibilities, going beyond the vulnerable/autonomous divide. This concept of social citizenship allows us to analyse how young adults' aspirations relate to full societal membership constructed through the interplay of participation and structural inequalities (Archer, DeWitt, and Wong 2014). Rather than viewing young adults as 'citizens-of-the-future' or as fully autonomous, this perspective recognises the dynamic and relational nature of citizenship as it unfolds in everyday contexts (Wood 2022). 'The "capability to aspire" is as a freedom in its own right', which involves recognising how young adults' connections, communities, and relationships both constrain and nurture 'certain imaginations of available futures' (Moensted 2021, 245). By highlighting how 'social citizenship aspirations' (Moensted 2021) shape young adults' trajectories, mainly of those in most disadvantaged situations, the complex relationship between structural limits, individual and community participation in finding 'new creative responses' can be identified (Reay 2004) as they allow us to (re)signify the *habitus*. This implies recognising the tensions, complexities and ambiguities of being a young citizen to understand the diversity of youth experiences of citizenship (Wood 2022).

The qualitative research presented in this article examines how specific socioeconomic challenges and educational inequalities shape the educational aspirations and expectations of some young adults identified as being at theoretical risk of leaving education early owing to their disadvantaged conditions. The article explores how these young adults construct and perceive their educational decisions in relation to their social conditions. This is especially pertinent in the Portuguese context, where substantial investments in educational reforms have been made over the past decade aiming to improve young people's futures. In the following sections, we establish the socio-historical background of the research, frame its conceptual foundations and describe the specific Portuguese educational context that shapes our participants' experiences.

Background

Before addressing the societal challenges linked to educational aspirations, it is essential to define this concept and its relationship with expectations.

Conceptual framework

Educational aspirations often describe 'idealistic hopes, dreams, and desires' (Chavira, Cooper, and Vasquez-Salgado 2016), while educational expectations are grounded in a pragmatic assessment of what young adults believe they can realistically achieve (Boxer et al. 2011) and are shaped by 'personal circumstances and societal constraints' (Behtoui

2017, 487). Khattab (2015) distinguishes that aspirations emerge from the ‘cultural sphere of society’, while expectations are formed by ‘perceived structures of opportunity’.

This dynamic relation highlights how aspirations are not solely individual desires but also fundamentally shaped by wider social, economic and institutional forces. even if Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) do not explicitly address the aspirations/expectations distinction, their concepts of social and cultural capital (networks providing access to resources) and *habitus* (internalised dispositions guiding perceptions) offer critical frameworks for understanding this dynamic. Their work allows an analysis of how young adults develop a sense of ‘what is for us’, with working-class youth typically adopting more pragmatic educational perspectives than their privileged peers whose ‘socially located habitus’ affords greater security (Van Praag et al. 2017) and access to resource-rich networks (Macedo and Araújo 2014). This means that students from a working-class family where no one has attended university might view higher education as foreign territory, even if they perform well academically. Meanwhile, students from privileged backgrounds ‘naturally’ tend to have higher educational aspirations because success feels more attainable, supported by their family’s cultural capital and class position.

Although this debate has been key to analysing how educational systems reproduce social inequalities, capital should be understood as dynamic and contextual rather than static. Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework challenges deficit-oriented views by identifying unique forms of capital in marginalised communities. Inspired by Bourdieu’s foundational theory (2018), her concept of ‘aspirational capital’ refers to ‘the ability to hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make such dreams a reality’ (Yosso 2005, 77). This allows a reframing of how resilience can be understood in educational contexts and offers crucial insights for policy intervention. Moreover, it allows a reconceptualising of aspiration as a collective resource nurtured within communities influenced by family expectations (Arnot and Swartz 2012; Chavira, Cooper, and Vasquez-Salgado 2016; Hung 2007) and peer networks (Schmid and Garrels 2021). One may say that while ‘familial capital’ and peers might contribute to reproduce educational and social structures of inequality, they might also incentivise changes in youngsters’ paths. Ultimately, this perspective breaks with the conventional understanding of aspirations among disadvantaged groups, advocating for a broader, more inclusive definition.

Building on Yosso’s framework, Moensted’s (2021) ‘social citizenship aspirations’ concept provides a valuable extension to this analysis. It recognises young adults’ broader desires for meaningful societal participation and belonging; that is, aspirations for valued social roles, dignified employment, housing security, and the ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships. Young adults’ imagined futures become shaped by experiences of recognition (or misrecognition) within educational institutions and other social contexts. As Moensted argues, social citizenship aspirations are fundamentally relational, reflecting young adults’ ‘embodied and emotional longing to find a valorised place’ in society (Moensted 2021, 237) – a place where they can exercise both their social rights and responsibilities as full members of their communities. Again, this might explain why interventions focused solely on ‘raising aspirations’ often fail without addressing the structural barriers to meaningful social participation.

The above lenses are valuable for bridging perspectives and interpretations about the various challenges that shape contemporary educational aspirations, considering social, contextual, collective, individual, and temporal constraints and opportunities.

The Portuguese context

In Portugal, poverty and inequality are particularly high, and educational attainment relatively low (Nada et al. 2022). However, since democratic rule in 1974, Portugal has presented a remarkable trajectory in educational improvement, reducing early leaving from education and training (ELET) from 50% in 1992 to approximately 7% in 2024 (Pordata 2025) – the biggest reduction of this indicator registered in the European Union (EU), as defined by Eurostat, to refer a person aged 18 to 24 recorded in the labour force survey whose highest level of education or training attained is at most lower secondary education. Supporting this transformation, several key policy measures have been implemented, which included: extending compulsory education to 12 years of schooling – ISCED3 (Law No. 85/2009); enacting inclusive education from primary to secondary education, as a non-categorical approach that recognises that all students have specific needs within a diverse spectrum (Decree-Law No. 54/2018); and increasing school autonomy (Decree-Law No. 55/2018). These reforms led to concrete initiatives including reductions in class sizes, enhanced support for vulnerable families, an expanded dual certification vocational education course, a National Programme for Promoting School Success, and the Educational Territories of Priority Intervention – an educational program that provides additional resources and autonomy to schools in disadvantaged areas to develop context-specific improvement plans addressing high dropout and failure rates.

Despite these reforms, the qualification-employment nexus has proved problematic, with unemployment rates for those under 25 consistently double that of the general population, and up to 3.5 times higher during the pandemic (Rodrigues et al. 2022). Although there has been an expansion in educational access, 56% of young employees (aged 15–24) were found to work on precarious contracts in 2022 (Tavares, Cândido, and Carmo 2021). While 17% of young adults in the EU are unable to obtain permanent contracts, this figure reaches 50% in Portugal (Pordata 2023). Tavares, Cândido, and Carmo (2021) report that Portugal's unemployment rates are consistently higher than the EU27 (all countries of the EU) average, highlighting the disproportionate impact of economic crises on Portuguese youth compared to their European counterparts. This discontinuity between educational investment and employment outcomes creates significant challenges for young adults' life planning, wellbeing, and transitions to adulthood. Additionally, Portugal's housing crisis compounds these challenges, as precarious work and low salaries limit young adults' autonomy; this is a complex context in which young adults are setting their aspirations and expectations.

Purpose

This article aims to contribute to scholarly discussions about youth transitions and to an understanding of how young adults' horizons of possibility are structured. It seeks to uncover the diversity of trajectories that a specific cohort of Portuguese young adults,

who are considered at risk of leaving education early, envision for themselves when asked 'What do you want to do next?' This question is asked in the context of the aspirations/expectations tension described above and the ways in which contemporary socio-economic conditions influence young adults' aspiration possibilities. The research posed the following specific questions: 1) What are the educational and occupational aspirations of young Portuguese adults at risk of leaving education early? 2) How do structural factors such as labour market precarity, economic uncertainty, and evolving concepts of adulthood shape these young adults' possibility to aspire and to pursue futures they have reason to value?

Method

We adopted a qualitative research design for this study, based around in-person semi-structured interviews, because we wished to conduct an in-depth exploration of young adults' experiences, perceptions, hopes and meaning-making processes. Through semi-structured interviews, we aimed to elicit young adults' voices – their stories, experiences, views and expectations of the world (Macedo 2018), enabling us to capture the complex ways in which they negotiated their structural constraints and opportunities. We particularly wished to understand the complexities facing vulnerable (ELET) young adults who tend to face restricting conditions such as: poor access to technology or home computers; difficulties accessing the labour market; precarious job situations including short term employment contracts, or no contracts at all, long working hours, very low salaries or poor recognition as workers; or poor households in which parental unemployment and subsidy dependency are common.

Ethical considerations

Prior to data collection, the study received formal approval from Ministerial Monitoring of School-based Surveys and the National Data Protection Committee. In addition to permissions from all educational institutions involved in the recruitment process, we secured informed consent from all participants, in the case of those under 18, both legal guardians and the minors themselves. Participants were explicitly informed about the study's purposes and expectations, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw. Participants' data was handled confidentially, and anonymity was maintained by removing all identifying information about specific schools, locations, and any personal details in the reporting of their data.

Particular attention was given to the potential vulnerability of participants labelled as 'at risk' by their institutions. The research team prioritised the ethical recognition of participants' voices, ensuring respect and fairness in how their accounts were represented; the greater their conditions of vulnerability, the greater the attention to the ethical dimension of the research, including fidelity and rigour in the interpretative translation of data collected and analysed (Macedo 2018). Interviews were non-judgemental and validated participants' perspectives and experiences, consciously avoiding reproducing power hierarchies between researchers and participants and ensuring that research interactions did not reinforce stigma.

Data collection

The study recruited young adults considered at theoretical risk of leaving education early based on the following criteria: age (17–24, the latter defined as the age limit for the ELET indicator); grade repetition (the number of times students repeated an academic year); course/subject failures; and family socioeconomic status. To ensure a diversity of experiences, participants were selected from three distinct educational trajectories: mainstream education; vocational education and training (VET); and those who left compulsory education without completing the 12th grade or reaching the age of 18. The students were based in urban and suburban upper secondary schools, and youth associations, in northern Portugal, and participated in the research voluntarily. The final sample included 24 participants: nine young men and 15 young women, with 8 individuals from each educational trajectory. Despite efforts to achieve gender balance, more young women volunteered. Most mainstream and VET school-based participants were in their final years of schooling (aged 17 to 19), and were identified by their schools, while early leavers (aged 19 to 21) were either identified by their former schools, or recruited through word-of-mouth among peers.

Semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of questions that were related to this paper's two research questions. These included: *Is your educational experience related with your employment prospects?*; *After leaving school early did your work experience change your perspectives on schooling and the labour market as well as your will to return to education?*; *Have your professional aspirations changed over time?*; *What challenges do you anticipate?*; *Do you discuss future plans with your family/friends?*; and *What are your dreams?* Interviews took place from June to September 2017, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The meetings with students from both mainstream and VET tracks took place inside schools, while interviews with early leavers were conducted in public spaces such as parks, gardens and cafés. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese, audio recorded, then transcribed and translated into English after being coded by the authors of this article.

Data analysis

All interviews were analysed thematically using NVivo qualitative analysis software. The analysis combined both deductive and inductive methods. After becoming familiar with the data through multiple readings, an initial coding framework was developed based on key concepts from the research questions and interview guidelines. This included pre-defined categories directly focused on *educational trajectories*; *educational and occupational aspirations*; *familial influence*; *connectedness to school and education*; and *ELET situation*. Additional codes derived inductively from participants' spontaneous accounts, allowed unexpected themes to surface, such as references to housing or parenthood. This combined approach ensured that our analysis remained grounded in the data. Different members of the research team 'cross-read' the codes to validate the analysis, and we conducted regular team discussions to refine and ensure consistency. This systematic process enabled us to identify individual views and cross-cutting patterns.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study organised around three categories that resulted from the thematic analysis, which directly address the papers' research questions. These categories are: 1) educational aspirations; 2) occupational expectations; and 3) affective and social citizenship aspirations. Together these categories stress the complex interplay between individual desires and structural constraints, exposing the factors that shape young adults' potential to aspire.

Educational aspirations

Participants identified three distinct views on the role of education in shaping their plans. These can be defined as: a *pragmatic view* – a linear pathway to quality employment; a *disillusioned view* – an internalisation of the limited role of education to overcome personal and structural constraints; and a *hopeful view* – recognising the transformative potential of education for social mobility, despite adversity. These are discussed, in turn, below.

A pragmatic view

For many of the young adults interviewed, especially those in more vulnerable situations, educational aspiration was driven by a pragmatic expectation of securing better jobs and by their perceived market value. These young adults viewed education as a strategic step and the 'right path' to enhancing their employability in a market-conditioned environment. One female mainstream education student highlighted this, explaining that she viewed some degrees as 'more powerful' than others: 'Job opportunities are always something to consider when we choose a course at university ... When I chose biochemistry, I wanted to ensure a safer future'. Similarly, another female mainstream student abandoned her aspiration of becoming an architect to study economics: 'because the expected job opportunities are better after seeing the pros and cons'. This pragmatic approach also extended to all VET students. These examples align with studies that highlight the instrumentalisation of education to labour market outcomes (Heinz 2009; Santos et al. 2020). Students tend to choose their educational pathways based on the perceived economic benefits and job security that specific degrees or courses of study can offer. This strategy underscores a broader trend where education is increasingly seen as a means of securing economic stability, rather than the pursuit of personal passions or vocations. This reinforces a realistic market-oriented approach to futures, with young people prioritising practical considerations and expectations over idealistic aspirations, focusing on the tangible benefits that education can provide.

A disillusioned view

Other participants, mainly those in VET programmes and early leavers, were discouraged by education due to a range of structural constraints which they believed limited their ability to aspire to higher goals. These young adults held a 'realistic pessimist' perspective on the transformative potential of education, resulting in low or no expectations of schools. One male VET student captured this sentiment: 'If all students were smart and

went to university, there would be no regular employees, such as garbage collectors. Not everybody can follow that path'. Another male VET student added:

As my family is poor, I never had great dreams. I always had the notion of what is real and what fiction is. I never had a great dream. I still do not ... Young adults do not have dreams and that is why they are so indifferent and unmotivated.

The following two male early leavers expressed similar views:

I said to myself, 12th grade [students aged 17 to 18]? What do I do with it? ... I can't have expectations of getting the job I want ... I left school and started work to earn some money.

It is not worth it. What guarantees I'll find a job? What assures me that university will be beneficial? ... Why go to university if it doesn't guarantee work?

These young people displayed a sense of individual deficit, reflecting an internalisation of structural limitations, believing they must resign themselves to the opportunities available to 'people like them' in a world in which education reproduces social inequalities as 'natural' (Behtoui 2017, 488). For these participants, the belief that further education would not significantly alter their life opportunities limited their educational aspirations. For other early leavers, the aspiration of pursuing educational study seemed exclusive, with socioeconomic barriers creating feelings of entrapment. This female early leaver explained: 'If I'd had a different life, I'd conclude it [12th grade], but I don't. It's impossible to reconcile work and school'. Unlike the young people who displayed a *pragmatic* view, these young adults considered this perspective to be an illusion expectation that would be unmet. This reveals some misalignment between what they would like to achieve, and what they expect is possible, with possibilities heavily conditioned by market structure.

A hopeful view

Despite feeling discouraged, some participants – particularly early leavers – still viewed education as having the power to be transformative. This perception tended to result from negative experiences after leaving school. Indeed, several school leavers saw returning to education as offering a potential turning point in their self-perception and life prospects. One male early leaver provided an illustration – he had shifted his perspective and sought to return to education by joining the Military Academy, as this offered an opportunity to earn money while completing his education. This exemplifies a complex interplay between aspirations and economic imperatives.

Two years ago, I just wanted to find a job to help my parents but then I realised I wouldn't advance in my career ... I decided I will join the Military Academy where I can balance job and studies.

Other participants acknowledged that despite adversities and low expectations, education could contribute to social mobility and changing trajectories. One female VET student highlighted this, explaining: 'I don't want to spend my whole life being a waitress'. Others viewed school as an opportunity to distinguish themselves from family and break cycles of social reproduction. In these examples, socioeconomic conditions were not preventative of aspiration. This male student in mainstream education expressed pride in pursuing education beyond his siblings:

My brother dropped out of school in the 6th grade [students aged 11 to 12]. He tried a course, but he failed. My sister was in the 8th grade [students aged 13 to 14], but she also dropped out and I came here ... I felt proud, I felt better than my siblings, I felt good, the fact [that] I invested in myself and always want more ... This takes me to another level.

Parental influence emerged as a key factor in shaping a hopeful view. Many participants across all three educational trajectories credited their parents, especially their mothers, for encouraging them to pursue education as a means of breaking the cycle of limited opportunities and escaping precariousness. The following two female VET students explained:

My mother used to work in a clothing factory, but it closed down and she never found another job. She became a domestic worker and says, 'I don't want you to go through what I'm going through now.' My father worked in construction his whole life until he had back problems. Now he's a doorman and says, 'I don't want you to spend your days waiting for a thief to show up.' My mother wants me to go to university to have a future and a safe life.

My mother wants me to go to university, and I want to go too because it opens more doors and provides more job opportunities and knowledge. She says, 'I want you to be someone in the future, but you make your own choices. I'm here to support you.'

While some young adults viewed education pragmatically, as a route to economic advancement, others felt discouraged by a perceived lack of opportunities. Encouragingly, those who had left school early had often come to value education as a trajectory for growth and mobility, motivated by aspirational capital despite systemic barriers.

Occupational aspirations

In common with the previous findings, young adults' occupational aspirations were constrained by their perceived attainability. Three distinct perspectives emerged: a *pragmatic view* – prioritising employment for financial reasons; a *disillusioned view* – of limited labour market opportunities; and a *hopeful, but radical, view* – in which emigration was viewed a second chance to start a new life.

A pragmatic view

Many participants felt pressured by their financial circumstances to enter the labour market as soon as possible, with financial independence outweighing the desire to continue studying. The need to earn money was not merely personal, but primarily to support their families. As one male early leaver stated openly: 'Money talks louder. I had to give up [education] ... I can't enrol in training yet because I need money at home'. Becoming a worker rather than a student was also a marker of adulthood, seen by many VET participants as a route to personal growth, earning money and getting 'status'. There were expectations regarding the independence and autonomy that work environments could foster. As this male early leaver explained: 'It is time to rest the brain a little from schools and go to another environment, which is the world of work'. Another male VET student added:

At the moment, I have had enough of studying ... You've got to start working, you can't spend your life studying. I want to make money, to have experience, to not be spending my mother's money all the time.

For these young adults, the desire to experience autonomy made immediate entry into the labour market a more pressing priority than continuing their education. Unlike those who had already faced the labour market and sought to return to education to improve their prospects (discussed earlier), these participants still viewed immediate entry to the labour market as an opportunity.

A disillusioned view

Many young adults experienced a gap between their occupational aspirations and the realities of the job market. Although some initially aspired to fulfilling careers, the economic environment often forced them to lower their expectations, as previously mentioned. Their primary goal therefore became finding any job that could provide financial independence, with little regard for their initial dreams or professional interests. This male VET student elaborated: 'There is nothing I would like to do [professionally] ... but you have to work. To be independent, you need money. That is why I want a job [but] not a specific one'. This sense of disillusionment was shared by the following female VET student:

Nowadays, we can't do what we like because there are no jobs. Sometimes we have to do whatever comes along. The country forces us to do things we don't like to do. But if we're given the opportunity to choose, we should fight for what we like to do.

These statements reflect how socio-economic conditions, including economic crises and labour market instability, can narrow the scope of occupational aspirations. Even the basic foundations for social citizenship achievement, such as finding job security, seem increasingly out of reach, turning even modest dreams into distant aspirations. Young adults from all three educational trajectories demonstrated this feeling of disillusionment, as the following quotations show:

I have no dreams ... The normal dreams ... car, house, family ... Just the normal ones ... But it is impossible for now. I need a job ... just a job. (Male early leaver)

I never thought about my dreams. (Male VET student)

My dreams are not very different from my plans. I want stability in life. Not to be in misery, having a job in the country. (Female student in mainstream education)

These responses reveal how young adults from various educational and social backgrounds internalise their limited social and structural mobility. Rather than aspiring to long-term goals, they prioritise immediate survival, reflecting that deeply rooted socio-economic barriers can shape their opportunities. This disillusionment underscores that the challenges they face are not only personal but systemic.

A hopeful, but radical, view

In the context of an unstable labour market, some young adults saw emigration as a viable option to improve their job prospects, to escape from low occupational expectations and

to achieve a better quality of life. One male participant in mainstream education shared his long-held desire to leave Portugal:

I always wanted to leave Portugal. I never liked living here. It is difficult abroad too ... I'm afraid, but I would adapt. I like new experiences. There's more employability, you earn more money.

A female VET student made a similar argument, noting: 'I think I'll be more successful if I leave the country'. For these young adults, emigration represented both an educational aspiration and a fresh start – a means to overcome the constraints of a country with high youth unemployment rates. The fact that some participants viewed leaving the country as their best chance for realising basic employment aspirations and quality of life points to severe structural deficits. Their desire represents both a creative response to structural limitations but also an indicator of a lack of opportunity for young adults in Portugal.

Affective aspirations: finding a place in society

Along with finishing school and securing employment, when asked about their dreams and future goals, participants across all educational trajectories identified family formation and homeownership as their primary life ambitions. One male VET student summed up this sentiment as follows:

I dream of having my own house, having a family and children, at least two – a girl and a boy. For that, it is necessary to have a permanent and secure job, to have the ideal conditions to be able to support the family.

This aspiration gains prominence precisely because access to housing, which should be guaranteed as a fundamental citizenship right and an achievable goal in a well-functioning society, has become an uncertain prospect within the current deregulated housing market. Portuguese youth currently confront an unprecedented housing crisis, which transforms notions of independence and homeownership into seemingly unattainable aspirations. In this context, participants' educational and occupational aspirations appear primarily instrumental – a route to achieving these fundamental material and social goals.

Beyond these goals, participants' aspirations seemed to intersect with their educational and occupational trajectories. Gaining a family or a house served either as motivation to aspire to higher education or qualification levels, or conversely, as a reason to interrupt their education, with impacts for their educational and occupational trajectories. If, for many participants, parenthood represents a delayed aspiration until suitable conditions arise, for others, unexpected life circumstances create additional barriers. As this female VET student explained, becoming unexpectedly pregnant added an additional layer of pressure, leading her to abandon/postpone her educational or professional ambitions:

No one will give me a job because I'm pregnant. Afterwards, I have to stay home for at least four months. Then, I'll have to see if I get a job. I'd like to go to university in three, four years, when life is more stabilised.

A female early leaver echoed similar difficulties, explaining how parenthood reshaped both her own and her partner's educational aspirations, as they found themselves forced to choose between continuing education and meeting family responsibilities:

My boyfriend will finish the 9th grade [students aged 14 to 15], and I think he should do more, but I know he won't be able to because of our baby. He wants to work to support him. I won't continue my education because I need to work to provide for him. If my life were different, I'd finish the 12th grade but it's impossible to manage both school and a job to earn a salary.

These stories illuminate how deeply affective aspirations both shape and are shaped by socio-economic conditions. Paradoxically, the very life transitions that young adults aspire to can themselves become barriers to educational attainment, creating a cycle of limited options. This demonstrates that personal aspirations are not separate from educational trajectories but fundamentally intertwined with them.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal an overlap between educational aspirations and expectations among young adults in northern Portugal. This represents a transformation in how young adults conceptualise their aspirations: rather than representing idealist hopes, dreams and desires, their aspirations have increasingly melted into pragmatic expectations about what can realistically be achieved within perceived structural constraints. This tension manifested across all participant groups – those in mainstream education, VET students, and early school leavers – albeit in different ways. While many held dreams for their futures, their real-life expectations – shaped by economic pressures and personal circumstances – often took precedence, or the line between dreams and realistic expectations became blurred. Young adults' capacity to dream has become so conditioned by their perceived reality that what used to constitute basic citizenship rights (a job, a house or the possibility of creating a family) is now framed as an aspirational goal rather than a reasonable expectation.

Merging aspirations and expectations

The findings reveal that young adults no longer distinguish between what they ideally desire and what they can pragmatically expect. Students in mainstream education, for example, tend not to choose fields based on passion, personal or vocational interest, but rather on perceived employment availability, demonstrating 'instrumental' educational aspirations. Equally, VET students and early leavers typically focus on immediate goals: completing 12th grade and entering the workforce, mainly to support their families. This exemplifies how structural factors – i.e. economic needs, alongside family economic capital – redefine the terrain upon which young adults' dreams can form, reinforcing previous research which shows that 'reduced home finances [are] associated with reduced opportunities for students' (Hay et al. 2016, 53). Our findings show that the capacity to aspire is not merely based on individual motivation, but is profoundly shaped and mitigated by socioeconomic realities.

The role of family capital

Research indicates that family capital can ‘offer considerable advantages in negotiating opportunities and avoiding risks and restrictions’ (Laughland-Booÿ, Mayall, and Skrbiš 2015, 590). This capital – rooted in generational knowledge, community connections, and collective memory transmitted across generations – can either nurture or stifle aspirations. For some participants, family financial insecurity restricted both their aspirational horizons and the imaginative scope within which they conceived their futures, perpetuating an ‘aspirational deficit’ and potentially creating cycles of hopelessness and invisibility. Yet, not all stories ended in resignation. Our findings also identified examples of ‘aspirational capital’ – the ability to dream despite barriers (Yosso 2005) – as a strategy to defy limitations and transcend adversities, disrupting cycles of vulnerability.

Parental influence

The findings also highlight the key role of parental aspirations in shaping young adults’ educational and occupational trajectories. Many participants across all three groups credited their parents – especially their mothers – with encouraging them to pursue education as a means of breaking the cycle of limited opportunities and escaping precariousness. These intergenerational aspirational transfers show the powerful role that familial aspirations play in shaping the future, with parents encouraging their children to achieve what they were unable to, and to break the link between occupational status and their children’s future academic attainment, nurturing *a culture of possibility*. However, as our findings on ‘disillusionment’ reveal, these aspirations increasingly collide with structural barriers that limit expectations – what young adults perceive as realistically attainable.

From aspirations to social citizenship

Finally, our study has shown how basic social citizenship rights such as stable employment, housing security, and family development have themselves become aspirational goals rather than guaranteed outcomes of educational investment. Research findings consistently show young adults postponing these fundamental aspects of adult life due to labour market precariousness and economic uncertainty. This transformation represents a profound shift in social contract expectations, in which previously expected life milestones have become uncertain privileges.

Limitations

There are some study limitations that must be mentioned. First, while a qualitative investigation with 24 participants from northern Portugal allowed us to offer rich insights into a specific group of young adults’ educational aspirations and expectations, it does not provide scope to offer generalisations to other contexts or populations, a condition that is inherent in any qualitative study. The strength of this research lies in its in-depth exploration of lived experiences and its analysis mobilising key classical and contemporary theoretical contributions. Second, the regionally specific sample, while capturing

diverse educational conditions (mainstream education, vocational training, and early leavers), cannot account for the heterogeneity of experiences across different Portuguese regions with varied socioeconomic characteristics. Finally, the gender imbalance in our sample (15 female and nine male participants) reflects typical research participation patterns but may underrepresent the perspectives of young adult males.

Conclusion

Sometimes expressed as dreams, young adults' aspirations are deeply shaped by the perceived opportunities available to them and the societal expectations of whom they can become. This article has explored how structural barriers and possibilities shape both personal and collective aspirations, revealing a persistent misalignment between what young adults hope for and what they expect they can achieve. To better understand this dynamic, a comprehensive framework that integrates both societal influences and individual agency appears valuable. The concept of 'social citizenship aspirations' (Moenstedt 2021) has helped to illustrate the unequal distribution of opportunities that enable young adults to aspire meaningfully.

By analysing the aspirations of young adults perceived to be at educational risk owing to their diverse conditions of vulnerability which may lead to early school leaving, the findings suggest that many feel constrained by the narrow paths available to them based on their socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Consequently, they develop pragmatic expectations, setting aside their dreams for more immediate, attainable goals. The pursuit of stable employment, access to housing, and the possibility of a fulfilling career – all fundamental citizenship rights – now seem increasingly out of reach due to a range of systemic limitations. What once seemed a reasonable expectation for all has become, for many, a distant and uncertain aspiration.

The economic crisis in Europe, particularly in southern countries like Portugal, has exacerbated these challenges by increasing unemployment and emigration. For many young adults, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, aspirations are now shaped by the immediate need to secure work and provide for their families, with long-term goals such as higher education or stable employment often feeling unattainable. Despite this internalisation of vulnerability, some young adults have shown resilience, refusing to accept the limits of their circumstances. For them, education or even emigration remains a way to defy the odds and achieve a better future. Their stories indicate that aspirations persist, even in the face of significant barriers.

Our research suggests that a reconsideration of the assumption that simply raising individual expectations will lead to enhanced educational outcomes is needed. A lack of belief in the power of education – compounded by unstable labour market conditions – suggests the relevance of exploring further the connections between education and the job market. Understanding the complex interplay between aspirations and expectations could contribute to educational policies that better support young adults' futures and their ability to aspire, despite the constraints they face.

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