

CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS IN THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO HIGHER EDUCATION

DESAFIOS E PERSPECTIVAS DE ESTUDANTES NA TRANSIÇÃO DO ENSINO MÉDIO PARA O ENSINO SUPERIOR

DESAFÍOS Y PERSPECTIVAS DE LOS ESTUDIANTES EN LA TRANSICIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN SECUNDARIA A LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR



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ABSTRACT: This article aimed to understand the challenges and perspectives of third-year high school students at Etec Guarujá in relation to their future insertion in higher education. As a research method, three conversation circles were held, involving a total of 30 third-year high school students, ten from each of the thematic areas Exact Sciences, Humanities, and Biological Sciences. The results show that parents have a direct influence on their children's career choice. It was observed that students experience insecurities and fears about making the right choice. This delicate transition generates anxiety, and the attentive support of parents and educators is necessary to provide a sense of security. It is concluded that attending to these young people's experience, by offering emotional support, guidance, and counseling, is essential for them to follow a smoother and more successful path.

KEYWORDS: Middle school. Higher education. Anxiety. Emotional support. Professional future.

RESUMO: O presente artigo objetivou compreender os desafios e as perspectivas dos estudantes do terceiro ano do Ensino Médio da Etec do Guarujá em relação à sua futura inserção no Ensino Superior. Como método, foram realizadas três rodas de conversa em que participaram um total de 30 estudantes do terceiro ano do Ensino Médio, sendo dez de cada um dos itinerários dos eixos temáticos Exatas, Humanas e Biológicas. Os resultados mostram que os pais têm influência direta na escolha profissional dos filhos. Observou-se que os estudantes apresentam inseguranças e medos para fazer a escolha certa. Essa transição delicada gera ansiedade, e se faz necessário o apoio atencioso dos responsáveis e dos educadores, trazendo segurança. Conclui-se que cuidar das vivências desses jovens, oferecendo apoio emocional, suporte e orientação, é essencial para que trilhem um caminho mais leve e bem-sucedido.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino Médio. Ensino Superior. Ansiedade. Apoio emocional. Futuro profissional.

RESUMEN: Este artículo tuvo como objetivo comprender los desafíos y perspectivas de los estudiantes del tercer año de la educación secundaria de la Etec de Guarujá en relación a su futura inclusión en la educación superior. Como metodología se realizaron tres círculos de conversación en los que participaron un total de 30 estudiantes de tercer año de la educación secundaria, diez de cada uno de los ejes temáticos Ciencias Exactas, Humanidades y Biológicas. Los resultados muestran que los padres tienen una influencia directa en la elección profesional de sus hijos. Se observó que los estudiantes presentan inseguridades y miedos sobre tomar la decisión correcta. Esta delicada transición genera ansiedad, y es necesario un apoyo atento de padres y educadores, que les brinden seguridad. Se concluye que atender las vivencias de estos jóvenes, ofreciéndoles apoyo emocional, respaldo y orientación, es fundamental para que puedan seguir un camino más sencillo y exitoso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Escuela secundaria. Educación superior. Ansiedad. Apoyo emocional. Futuro profesional.

INTRODUCTION

The expectation of gaining admission to a prestigious university or entering the job market is a reality faced by many young people upon completing high school. This pressure, often internalized as an imperative, is exacerbated by the influence of family members and society, creating an environment conducive to the development of anxiety. According to Vianna et al. (2009), anxiety is a disorder that can manifest as early as childhood and adolescence and is influenced by social and family factors.

Upon entering higher education, one of the main challenges faced by students is adapting to the new academic environment. Many students deal with a sense of being overwhelmed due to the workload and the complexity of the material covered. Furthermore, a lack of adequate guidance during high school can contribute to difficulties in adapting (Garcia-Silva et al., 2025).

Time management also becomes a significant factor in this process. Students who have not developed effective time-management skills in high school may find it difficult to balance their studies, work, and personal lives (Soares et al., 2020). The transition from high school to college is a critical period, during which academic pressure and performance expectations can significantly increase anxiety levels among young Brazilians (Assis et al., 2007).

Assis et al. (2007) point out that anxiety can be exacerbated by expectations regarding academic and professional performance, which are often imposed by parents and society. This constant pressure can lead to significant physical and emotional symptoms, affecting young people's overall well-being. Furthermore, Soares (2002) points out that adapting to the college environment can be an additional challenge, contributing to increased anxiety. The lack of an adequate support network and high academic demands are factors that make this transition difficult.

Given this scenario, it is essential that parents, educators, and society as a whole remain attentive to signs of anxiety in young people, striving to create a more welcoming and less oppressive environment. Understanding and support can have a significant impact on students' mental health and healthy development.

Furthermore, the transition to higher education can be emotionally challenging, as many students experience feelings of anxiety and insecurity when faced with a new environment and new expectations. The pressure to perform well academically can lead to stress and emotional exhaustion (Gonçalves et al., 2025).

The transition to higher education is a complex period for students, during which family support and guidance from educators prove to be fundamental pillars, as noted by Terruggi et al. (2019). Families that provide emotional and financial support while encouraging autonomy contribute significantly to young people's confidence and preparedness. At the same time, educators who build positive relationships and provide effective academic guidance can help mitigate the challenges of this transition. However, for educators to fulfill this role optimally, it is crucial to consider their own well-being.

The study conducted by Garcia-Silva et al. (2025) shows a positive correlation between working conditions and teachers' ability to promote student engagement and provide guidance. From this perspective, investing in faculty well-being goes beyond a matter of professional equity, emerging as a fundamental strategy for optimizing the support offered to students on their path to higher education.

Excessive pressure from families to achieve good academic results can increase students' levels of stress and anxiety. Furthermore, a lack of emotional support can make it difficult for students to adapt to their new environment (Gonçalves et al., 2025). Educators who do not provide the necessary support or who have disproportionate expectations can intensify students' insecurity and stress. A lack of constructive feedback can also negatively affect students' preparation for higher education (Soares et al., 2020).

Therefore, it is essential that high schools establish vocational and academic guidance programs. Such programs can help students understand their career options and prepare for the demands of higher education. Universities can also develop orientation programs for incoming students. Studies show that mentoring can reduce anxiety and boost students' confidence during the transition (Gonçalves et al., 2025). The availability of institutional psychological support is a crucial factor in student well-being, especially regarding the management of stress and anxiety. In this regard, this article aimed to understand the challenges and perspectives of third-year high school students at the State Technical School (Etec) in Guarujá regarding their future transition to higher education.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Etec Alberto Santos Dumont, which offers the following high school programs in the morning: the Educational Track in Biological, Agricultural, and Health Sciences (Biological Track); the Educational Track in Exact Sciences and Engineering

(Exact Sciences Track); and the Educational Track in Languages and Humanities (Humanities Track). This Etec is located in Jardim Ana Maria, in the municipality of Guarujá, which has a population of 297,973 (IBGE, 2024).

The Professional Master's research conducted in the Graduate Program in Health Sciences Education (PPGECS-MP) was initiated only after approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of São Paulo, under Opinion No. 6321.266/2023 and CAAE No. 69932023200005505, and with the consent of Etec's administration and the students or their guardians, after they voluntarily signed the Free and Informed Assent Form and the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE).

To collect data, three discussion groups were held, involving a total of 30 high school seniors—ten from each of the three thematic tracks: Exact Sciences, Humanities, and Biological Sciences. This method was chosen because it is widely used in participatory research and is grounded in psychosocial intervention workshops, with the aim of creating a space for reflection where participants can discuss aspects of daily life, such as their relationship with the world, with work, and with their life plans. For this to happen effectively, it was essential that the discussion circles take place in an environment where students felt free to express themselves, overcoming fears and personal barriers, as noted by Adamy et al. (2018).

At the beginning of the meetings, specific procedures were adopted to ensure the activity was conducted appropriately. The facilitator began the sessions by thanking everyone for attending and emphasized that the goal was to foster a space for interaction among participants. Permission was requested to record the conversations, with due assurance that participants' privacy would be protected. To ensure anonymity, the students were not identified, and the sessions took place over three separate days at Etec itself, respecting the students' daily schedules and seeking to minimize any impact on their other academic activities. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes.

In a pedagogical environment designed to foster student autonomy and the authentic expression of their perspectives, understandings, and emotions, students were given ample time for free expression. The discussion was structured around a pre-established set of questions, which served as a guiding framework to deepen reflection and encourage student engagement with the topics at hand. The discussion, therefore, was guided by the following questions: Considering the end of high school, what impact has this period had on your experience? What are your career plans? What difficulties and aspirations have you experienced during this stage regarding your future choices? How do parents or guardians influence this transition process?

What role do teachers play in this process? What criticisms and praise do you have for the school?

The focus group discussions were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using the thematic content analysis technique (Bardin, 2016), with the aim of gathering the participants' perceptions and reflections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis reveal two categories and seven subcategories, which are presented below in Table 1:

Table 1.

Categories of analysis

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY
Family influence	Pressure to choose a career
	Network-based educational support
	Parental expectations
Career choices and fears	Uncertainty about the future
	Fear of not being admitted to higher education
	Indecision
	Financial concerns

Note. The authors (2025).

The first category to be presented will be “Family Influence,” which will include three subcategories: 1) Pressure to choose a career; 2) Network-based educational support; and 3) Parental expectations.

Family influence category

The analysis of the focus groups identified a set of concerns and perceptions among students regarding the job market and academic progression. Recurring themes emerged that highlight the inherent complexity of the decision-making process and the pressure experienced by students. This finding reinforces the need to adapt in order to acquire new skills and seek opportunities in the contemporary job market (Brasil, 2021; Carvalho, 2004). This confidence and willingness to learn overcome fear and hesitation, ultimately leading to financial improvements as well. In this category, family impacts stand out, manifesting in the three subcategories presented below.

Pressure to choose a career

With regard to the job market, career choices and indecision in the face of various options emerged as significant concerns among the students. Family and social pressure to make quick and decisive decisions exacerbates this anxiety. During the roundtable discussion, the participating students expressed:

There's all this pressure from our parents. (E15)

My parents wanted me to study logistics so I could work here for my uncle, but I told them I didn't want to. They're upset, it's pretty funny. (E11)

I really wanted to work in a caregiving role, especially with children, because I see that they aren't getting the right kind of attention. You have to think things through and guide them. We start in childhood and try to get organized. So I want to get into a career that's really sustainable, you know? Something hands-on, man. And like I've already told you, it wouldn't be a problem, but there's pressure from my parents. [...] To get a job. So, there's all this indecision, there's all this pressure, it's a whole thing. (E5)

By sharing their experiences, the students reveal the pressure they feel, which is understandable, given that the process of maturing is often associated with internalized expectations. Their accounts express anxieties and highlight the difficulty they face in finding an attentive ear within their families. This observation aligns with the research by Coelho and Dell'Aglío (2018), which emphasizes the impact of family pressure on young people's career choices. As Costa et al. (2025) point out, for healthy professional development, it is crucial that families provide educational activities that foster critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and teamwork—essential skills for success in any professional field.

Network-based educational support

The importance of parental support and encouragement has emerged as a fundamental element in the educational process, although it is not a universal experience among students. The need for robust support networks—capable of mitigating the challenges constantly reported by students, especially those living in different neighborhoods within the municipality—becomes evident, as shared in their own experiences.

My parents have always supported me in pursuing medicine. (E6)

I need his help. To find a job. (E17)

I didn't really have much support myself. It was more basic. I did most of it on my own, but parental support, in general, is very important. (E25)

During this period of academic transition, support plays a crucial role, as does the dissemination of information through the experiences of seasoned individuals, who can provide valuable examples to students. Success in one's educational journey is directly correlated with family support, an essential element for fostering students' autonomy and self-confidence (Brito & Lyra, n.d.).

Expectativas parentais

In their reflections, the students acknowledged the substantial influence of their parents on their life paths, attributing this impact to the wealth of experience their parents had accumulated. However, they raised a caveat regarding the importance of parental caution, in order to avoid interventions that could act as obstacles or hinder the students' individual development. In this regard, they stated:

But there's all this pressure from parents. You feel obligated to be at home. (E13)

Ever since I was little, I've always wanted to study medicine. I was undecided about it, but I think now, from when I started high school until now, I've been very undecided, because I know how much it costs; it's a heavy burden for my parents. (E7)

I think they play a very important role. [...] They're the people who can explain what no one else understands. They can help their children on this journey through life, because there's a transition. (E24)

In line with Brito and Lyra (n.d.), parental guidance plays a crucial role in the transition to adulthood during adolescence. However, it is imperative that such guidance be provided in a thoughtful manner, avoiding the imposition of choices that might curtail young people's

autonomy. Excessive family influence on career decisions can trigger substantial conflicts of interest, underscoring the inherent complexity of this dynamic.

Career choices and fears category

An analysis of this category reveals the significant extent of the uncertainties surrounding the career choice process. This spectrum of insecurities ranges from concerns about one's future academic path, notably the fear of failing to gain admission to higher education, to the myriad of indecisions that characterize this developmental stage. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the direct and substantial impact of these dynamics on the financial situation of the individuals involved and their respective families.

The analysis of this category will highlight the magnitude of the uncertainties surrounding career choices, ranging from academic futures, including the fear of not gaining admission to college, to the many indecisions that characterize this period, which also have a direct impact on the financial situation of the individuals involved.

From the second category identified, Career choices and fears, four subcategories emerged: 4) Uncertainty about the future; 5) Fear of not entering higher education; 6) Indecision; and 7) Financial issues, which will be presented below.

Uncertainty about the future

The uncertainty inherent in the transition to higher education can raise significant doubts, impacting academic performance and the decision-making process regarding one's career path. This period, characterized by the tension between the aspiration to continue one's studies and the imminent need to choose a field of specialization, tends to exacerbate anxiety related to admission to undergraduate programs. The convergence of student accounts illustrates this dynamic, as evidenced by the following statements:

I want to major in psychology, but I'm afraid I won't be able to get into the college or land the job I want, but I really don't know. I'm really afraid of that. (E3)

I really want to figure out what I want right now. I've started to find myself daydreaming about my choices, but it's not easy. (E15)

As high school graduation approaches, a sense of uncertainty tends to envelop the student body, driven by multiple factors. The imminent separation from the familiar school

environment and established social circle, combined with concerns inherent in the transition to a new phase, often lacking concrete points of reference, contributes significantly to the emergence of a sense of insecurity. This apprehension is corroborated by empirical findings, which highlight anxiety and fear as substantial obstacles that can negatively impact students' educational trajectories. The study by Teixeira and Tassoni (2024) shows that the search for financial stability emerges as a predominant—though not exclusive—factor in decisions regarding students' future entry into the workforce.

Fear of not being admitted to Higher Education

Fear is a powerful catalyst for stress; it permeates students' experiences, weaving a complex web of feelings that profoundly impact their lives at work and in their studies. At a crucial moment of self-discovery, where the ambition to continue their studies intertwines with the quest to define their paths, the fear of not graduating looms like a persistent shadow. The following three accounts echo this inner struggle, illustrating the intensity of this feeling:

I'm afraid I won't be able to get into the college I want to attend, or that I won't be able to get into any college at all, I'm really afraid of that. (E12)

I want to study psychology in college, but I'm afraid I won't be able to get into a college, or that I won't get into any college at all; I'm really afraid of that. (E25)

One of my greatest desires is journalism; that's what I want to pursue. But what if I simply can't find a job, or if I don't get paid well, or if I'm not good at what I do? That's why I'm unsure about what to actually choose going forward. (E4)

The impending career decision causes apprehension among students, who ponder the appropriateness of their choices and the potential future returns. This anxiety is not unfounded. As Bock et al. (2018) point out, career choice is a crucial period in a young person's life, often marked by significant uncertainties and doubts. Career choice in the educational context presents a complex landscape, filled with both challenges and opportunities that require careful analysis. Rossi and Favretto (2022) corroborate this perspective by investigating the impact of anxiety and indecision on the career selection process and the transition to higher education.

Through the lens of Lev Vygotsky's (2008) sociocultural theory, we understand the importance of social and cultural interactions in cognitive development. This perspective

suggests that established social support—whether through qualified career counseling, mentoring by experienced professionals, or even support from peers and family members—can play a fundamental role in supporting students. By providing a space for dialogue and reflection, this support can help young people alleviate the insecurities and anxieties inherent in entering higher education, thereby strengthening their self-confidence and clarity regarding their professional future.

Indecision

Insecurity regarding students' intellectual potential emerges as a crucial factor that can trigger demotivation in the academic environment. By undermining self-confidence and the perception of self-efficacy, this anxiety hinders engagement in learning activities and the pursuit of intellectual challenges. In line with the findings of the research conducted by Rossi and Favretto (2022), insecurity also proves to be a decisive factor in the complex process of career choice among young people, influencing their aspirations and the way they envision their professional future. When students feel insecure about their cognitive abilities, they may avoid fields they perceive as intellectually demanding, thereby limiting their range of options and compromising their ability to reach their full potential, as reflected in the following statements:

I never really had a clear idea of what I wanted to do. I've always liked a lot of things, but I never said, "Oh, that's what I want." (E3)

[...] I wanted to go to college so I could have the freedom to be a teacher. Now I want to study advertising and marketing, which covers a lot of things that really interest me, like photography, design, and communication. (E15)

You feel obligated to be at home. I just took them to the doctor; I'm not going to leave the house now, I need to help them, and I don't know what I'm going to do. (E26)

The phase of indecision during the transition from high school to college, as noted by Bedin and Del Pino (2018), is a common phenomenon, but one that can be significantly mitigated through robust career planning and effective institutional support. In this regard, Teixeira and Tassoni (2024) emphasize the crucial importance of targeted support during this transition period. Adequate support enables students to make more informed decisions that are truly aligned with their talents and vocations, reducing anxiety and increasing their chances of

success in their academic and professional careers. By offering guidance and resources, educational institutions play a fundamental role in helping young people navigate this crossroads, transforming indecision into conscious and promising choices.

Financial issues

The influence of financial considerations on career decisions emerged as a central theme in the discussions. The students shared their perspectives, revealing how economic concerns actively shape their career choices. In their accounts, it became evident that the pursuit of financial stability and adequate compensation often takes precedence over specific passions or vocations, steering their career paths toward options considered safer and more lucrative. This reality raises important questions about the balance between personal aspirations and material needs in young people's professional decision-making process, as can be seen in the transcripts:

Financially, I think that's a factor for me, too. Oh, I know it's complicated because my parents wanted me to study logistics so I could work here for my uncle, but I told them I didn't want to. They're upset, it's pretty funny. (E14)

To improve myself in what I want to do, in what I really like, even though I'm still undecided about it. Yes, I'm looking for financial stability. I'm looking to have a slightly better standard of living. But I don't want that to be my main goal; I want to do something I enjoy. It might seem frivolous, but for me it's important, because it's something you may or may not do for the rest of your life. (E3)

Hesitation in defining a career path, intrinsically linked to the desire for financial security, emerged as a focal point of this research. The findings underscore the considerable importance attributed to financial stability, echoing the conclusions of Teixeira and Tassoni (2024), who identified it as a crucial, though not absolute, factor in young people's career decisions. Similarly, Terruggi et al. (2019) highlight the impact of economic pressure on vocational choices, often driving students toward professional fields that signal greater financial security. However, this predominantly economic approach tends to obscure the fundamental role of emotion and passion in career choice—an aspect that resonated significantly in the narratives of the students who participated in this study. Their experiences reveal that, although financial security is an important consideration, the desire for engagement and personal

fulfillment in an area of genuine interest exerts a powerful—and at times conflicting—influence on their career decisions.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study examined the challenges and perspectives of third-year high school students at Etec do Guarujá regarding their future transition to higher education. From this perspective, the study analyzed the educational dynamics and pressures experienced by students in the final stage of basic education, offering relevant insights for improving pedagogical practices and the institutional support provided to students.

The focus group discussions revealed the complexity of students' concerns and perceptions regarding family influence, which manifests itself in pressure to pursue vocational training, educational support through a network of relationships, and the desire to meet their parents' expectations. The complexity of the situation they are experiencing and the pressure faced by students emerged as recurring themes, highlighting the significant impact of these issues on young people's lives.

Another recurring theme in the analyses reveals the intrinsic link between career choices and the fears experienced by students during the transition to higher education. Indecision about one's career fuels uncertainty about the future and, potentially, the fear of not entering higher education.

Given the context described, family and social pressure emerge as a catalyst for the anxiety expressed. Furthermore, financial issues, although underlying, permeate these concerns, influencing students' decisions and fears regarding their professional and academic trajectories. The implications of these findings highlight the importance of interventions that address the multidimensional nature of these challenges.

The provision of psychological support is a crucial element in the transition from high school to higher education, aimed at ensuring that students make informed career choices that are consistent with their individual aptitudes. Additionally, the issue of vocational indecision, coupled with the desire for financial stability, has emerged as a topic of significant relevance. Although the pursuit of economic security is a determining factor in students' career decisions, it is important to note that it is not the only factor influencing such choices.

In summary, the conversation circles established themselves as a fruitful, dialogic, and reflective environment for students, fostering a deeper understanding of their experiences and

perceptions. The data emerging from this investigative process form a robust empirical framework for the formulation of support strategies aimed at developing more secure and informed career choices and educational trajectories.

The significant influence of social and family pressure on students' decisions leads to anxiety and uncertainty. The focus group methodology proved effective in capturing these perceptions, providing a solid foundation for understanding the complex dynamics inherent in young people's career and educational choices.

It became clear that the influence of parents and teachers is complex, exerting both positive and negative impacts on students' decisions. The conversation circle proved to be an effective method for capturing these perceptions and providing a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics of influence in the career-choice process.

The transition from high school to higher education is a period of significant vulnerability for young people, characterized by multifaceted changes and complex adaptive demands. In this context, robust parental and educational support emerges as a crucial factor in moderating the levels of anxiety frequently observed in this population.

Anxiety, therefore, manifests as a common psychological response and may, in some cases, intensify during the process of entering higher education, driven by the ambiguity inherent in this new stage and by the high expectations associated with this transition. However, the specialized literature consistently demonstrates that the emotional and practical support provided by parents and educators has a substantial mitigating effect on these symptoms, fostering an environment of greater emotional security and adaptability for students.

In short, it is essential that parents and teachers focus their attention on young people's experiences during this transitional phase, providing active support and qualified guidance as a preventive measure against the development of difficulties and anxiety disorders. Proactive intervention by the socio-educational environment thus serves as a facilitating factor for a healthier and more successful adaptation to this new stage of life.

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