

Internship Experiences: Contributions to the School-to-Work Transition¹

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Abstract: Training experiences in higher education are essential to professional development. This qualitative study investigated how internship experiences contribute to career adaptability development and to the transition between the roles of student and professional among senior university students. Six Civil Engineering senior students, aged between 22 and 29 years, were individually interviewed following a semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews were subsequently content analyzed. Results revealed that internship experiences influence the development of career adaptability, especially in the dimensions of curiosity and confidence. In addition, several characteristics of the internship experiences mentioned by respondents could be related to career development, revealing their importance to the transition process from student to professional roles. The article concludes with implications for practice and research.

Keywords: professional development, professional education, college students, professional identity

Experiências de Estágio: Contribuições para a Transição Universidade-Trabalho

Resumo: As experiências de formação no ensino superior são fundamentais para o desenvolvimento profissional. Este estudo teve por objetivo compreender de que forma as experiências de estágio contribuem para o desenvolvimento da adaptabilidade de carreira e para a transição entre os papéis de estudante a profissional em formandos universitários. Participaram seis formandos de um curso de Engenharia Civil, com idades entre 22 e 29 anos. Foram realizadas entrevistas semi-estruturadas individuais, posteriormente analisadas quanto ao conteúdo. Os resultados revelaram que as experiências de estágio influenciam o desenvolvimento da adaptabilidade de carreira, especialmente nas dimensões de curiosidade e confiança. Além disso, várias características dos estágios mencionadas pelos entrevistados mostraram-se relacionadas ao desenvolvimento de carreira, revelando sua importância para o processo de transição do papel de estudante para o de profissional. O artigo conclui com implicações para a prática e a pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento profissional, formação profissional, estudantes universitários, identidade profissional

Experiencias de Pasantía Profesional: Contribuciones a la Transición Universidad-Trabajo

Resumen: Las experiencias de formación en la educación superior son fundamentales para el desarrollo profesional. La finalidad de este estudio fue comprender como las experiencias de la pasantía profesional contribuyen al desarrollo de la adaptabilidad de carrera y a la transición entre los roles de estudiante y profesional en alumnos finalistas de la enseñanza superior. Participaron seis estudiantes del último año de un curso de Ingeniería Civil, con edades comprendidas entre 22 y 29 años. Fueron realizadas entrevistas individuales semi-estructuradas, posteriormente sometidas al análisis de contenido. Los resultados revelaron que las experiencias de la pasantía profesional influyen en el desarrollo de la adaptabilidad de carrera, especialmente en las dimensiones de curiosidad y la confianza. Además, varias características de la pasantía mencionadas por los participantes fueron relacionadas con el desarrollo de la carrera, revelando su importancia en el proceso de transición del rol de estudiante a profesional. El artículo concluye con implicaciones para la práctica y la investigación.

Palabras clave: desarrollo profesional, educación profesional, estudiantes universitarios, identidad profesional

The transition from the university to the job market is a potentially conflicting task, which can represent a crisis related to the professional choice, as it requires a range of choices regarding possible professional routes (Bardagi, Lassance, Paradiso, & Menezes, 2006). The quality of this transition will largely depend on students' own involvement with their education and on the development

of competencies that are useful to the labor world (Teixeira & Gomes, 2004; Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008).

College students follow varying professional training trajectories though. While some follow a more "student" trajectory and are merely concerned with appropriate compliance with academic requirements, others attempt to more actively develop a professional posture and experiences that approach them to professional practice (Lassance & Gocks, 1995). Hence, the college education period can be considered a great developmental transition, which demands that individuals develop a series of adaptation movement, at least among typical young adult students (recently graduated from secondary education).

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The early years are also characterized by late-adolescence demands (including identification with the “status” of a college student, belonging to a group) and more passive involvement in education; over time, however, concerns with professionalization and the future tend to increase (Lassance & Gocks, 1995).

These different forms of involvement with education and the profession itself can reflect, at least partially, differences in career adaptability, a concept deriving from vocational development literature (Savickas, 2005). Career adaptability refers to behaviors, attitudes, competencies and coping strategies individuals use to take part in their community and adapt to different contexts and career transitions. Adaptability relates to ‘how’ people build their career, how they choose, plan and put targets in practice. There exist four core aspects or dimensions to career adaptability (Savickas, 2005): concern, control, curiosity and confidence. Adaptability is, therefore, a set of attitudes and behaviors that allow individuals to construct their career to the extent that they are oriented towards the future (concern), explore possibilities and are open to experiences (curiosity) and find themselves confident (confidence) and capable of exerting some control (control) over their trajectory.

To understand how students change throughout the education process, from students to professionals, and gain career adaptability resources, the development of the self-concept or identity (self-concept and identity are considered equivalent in this study) needs to be considered. Self-concept can be understood as the image people hold of themselves in the different roles they play across the lifetime, like son or daughter for example, father or mother, student or worker. It is based on this view they have of themselves that subjects make choices, looking for opportunities to express their self-concept through the roles they play (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Thus, college students make their first attempt to translate their self-concept in professional terms when they choose a higher education program. At first, however, the student’s role tends to stand out more (at least for typical students), instead of the worker’s role.

Therefore, the school-to-work transition implies not only a transition between contexts (environments), but also an identity transition. As mentioned, people have different identities, corresponding to their social roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Each role comes with a set of distinct social expectations, demanding a specific identification and contributing to the individual’s self-perception. In the transition from university to the job market, individuals are required to identify themselves more intensely with the role of workers and less intensely with that of students. In addition, their identification with the professional role itself is questioned, which relates to specific characteristics in each educational area (Ng & Feldman, 2007). In that sense, the

start of professional practice also represents a crucial point in the professional identity construction process, starting from which individuals will be socially acknowledged according to their profession and will have the opportunity to satisfy their psychological, social and material needs through their work. Thus, individuals’ school-to-work transition covers a critical period in their construction of meanings about themselves, with important repercussions for the future, as initial experiences of inclusion in the job market can influence future career patterns (Angot, Malloch, & Kleymann, 2008; Ng & Feldman, 2007).

Ceasing to be a student, the role played throughout the educational trajectory, and assuming an identity as a worker demands that individuals take a very different stand in their social network. Social expectations of students involve some degree of passiveness and belonging to a protected environment. As regards workers, activity, responsibility and autonomy are expected and a role is attributed that is linked with the adult world. Therefore, playing this new role requires an anticipatory movement and competency development to cope with this new context, as objectives, activities, rules and hierarchy in work organizations differ from the teaching institutions students are accustomed to (Wendlandt & Rochlem, 2008).

It should be highlighted that the traditional trajectory for middle-class youth is to work only after graduating. Even for students with work experiences before graduation, however, the landmark of graduating inscribes them in a socially different role: as professionals. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate how the identity formation of workers and professionals’ role takes place during the undergraduate program, as these processes affect the quality of the school-work transition (Ng & Feldman, 2007).

It is known that extra-class activities related to higher education play an important role in this passage from student to professional. Some studies appoint that students who engage in activities beyond their presence in the classroom, such as internships, tutorships and research, show positive career development indicators (Bardagi et al., 2006; Brooks, Cornelius, Greenfield, & Joseph, 1995; Fior & Mecuri, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Teixeira & Gomes, 2004). Internship experiences particularly stand out among relevant activities for professional education and development. These are not only related to higher employability levels among newly graduates, but also serve as an approximation with the reality of the job world, contributing to the development of cross-sectional competencies (that is, not technical, including responsibility, autonomy) and to a more realistic adaptation of students’ expectations regarding work (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Slep & Read, 2006).

In addition, in research, the positive effects of internship experiences on the vocational self-concept and professional self-efficacy have been highlighted.

The vocational self-concept refers to how individuals see themselves, their interests, values and capacities, and how they translate this self-concept in occupational terms (Super et al., 1996). In that sense, internships permit refining the vocational self-concept, as they help individuals to better acknowledge their interests and skills, putting to proof this self-image translated into their occupation, whether by reinforcing or questioning it (Angot et al., 2008; Brooks et al., 1995; Caires & Almeida, 2001; Mihail, 2006). Internships largely remain privileged spaces for vocational exploratory behavior, during which students can experiment with a view to gaining further knowledge, as much about the profession as about themselves (Super et al., 1996; Taveira, 2000). This openness to be curious and experiment permits the discovery of new possibilities and the development of new competencies, as an important resource in the career building process (Savickas, 2005).

Finally, by permitting practical skills tests, internships also enhance the development of professional self-efficacy, that is, the feeling of competence to accomplish professional tasks (Brooks et al., 1995; Caires & Almeida, 2001; Teixeira & Gomes, 2004). Not all internship experiences necessarily contribute to students' professional development though. Some studies show that certain characteristics are important for a positive assessment of internships, such as having clear tasks related to the educational area, valuation and respect for the trainee, varying tasks, challenging activities and feedback from supervisors (Angot et al., 2008; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Mihail, 2006).

This study was aimed at understanding how extra-class academic experiences, particularly internships, contribute to the development of career adaptability and to the transition between the roles of student and professional in undergraduates.

Method

Participants

Research participants were six undergraduates in Civil Engineering from a Brazilian federal university, four women and two men, between 22 and 29 years of age. The choice of the course was convenience-based, and participants were invited among the course graduates who participated in a preliminary quantitative survey (Silva, 2010). The duration of the internships ranged between six months and four years and a half. One of the participants had not started the internship yet when the interview took place, but was nevertheless included in the research, as his report could be contrasted with the others based on this difference.

Instrument

The instrument used was a semistructured interview, addressing the following themes: a short life history of the

participant, undergraduate trajectory since professional choice until date, academic experiences considered most relevant for professional education (including extra-class activities) and way to deal with the transition from student to worker and professional. The script was aimed at directing the interviews, while nevertheless reserving time to ask questions as appropriate, according to the interaction with each participant.

Procedures

Data collection. Participants were contacted by telephone or e-mail and individual interviews were scheduled according to the participants' convenience. These were recorded and held at the researchers' university. The approximate duration varied between one hour and 15 minutes and two hours.

Data analysis. The interviews were literally conducted and the material was submitted to qualitative content analysis (Bardin, 1977). Through successive readings of the interviews, which the primary author had transcribed, revelatory excerpts were identified in the reports which were relevant for the research problem and were organized in four categories (themes), as a way to describe the participants' experience.

Ethical Considerations

The study proposal received previous approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the University's *Instituto de Psicologia*, registered under protocol 2009/020. Participants were informed about the study objectives and signed an Informed Consent Term before starting to participate, taking all due ethical caution.

Results

The results were grouped in three main categories. The first, "Identity in Transition", describes the paramount changes the students perceive in themselves when they contrast the initial period with their graduation. The second category was called "Relevant Educational Experiences" and covers the main professional development activities the participants mentioned. The final category, called "Internship characteristics", consists of six themes that address the main characteristics of the internship associated with career development. The participants received fictitious names.

Identity in Transition

The students reported changes in the way they perceived themselves at the start and end of their undergraduate program, in which the movements towards professionalization were noteworthy, which involve increased responsibility and

seriousness. Status changes were also mentioned, including perceived social acknowledgement referent to becoming an engineer, which adds up to being a student or technical worker.

In fact, I think they (relatives) see me as much more serious now, at the start (of the course) ... before I was ... ah I used to go out more, I was more ... not irresponsible, 'cause I wasn't. But I used to mess around more, did some stuff that ... now I'm more homebound, I don't go out that much at night, and ... I think that's the main difference. They see that I'm much more focused on the professional part ... I think that was the main change like. As graduation came closer, I was thinking I had to become more serious like... Then it seems that you have to grow up once and for all. (Camila, 25 years)

Relevant Educational Experiences

The participants mentioned that some experiences were important for their professional education, such as extra-class activities, scientific initiation, Tutorial Education Program (PET), field visits and mainly the internship. The fact that they performed professional activities during the internship was highlighted, as this allowed them to try out themselves in a more active position and putting in practice the knowledge gained in college, integrating theory and practice. The case of one of the participants, who did not go through any internship, indicates the extent to which the absence of this activity makes it difficult to link theory and practice.

For me, paid work has always been necessary ... Then that didn't combine with the internship, that's why I was unable to draw that parallel between knowledge you learn in college and practical knowledge, about construction ... I had to leave that aside. (André, 29 years)

I think that the part that most transforms, that most transformed me across this entire trajectory, were extra-class experiences. The classes did not transform me. Of course, those too, but it wasn't the main thing. I think these professional experiences were paramount, right. Working with different things, doing different things, contact with different people and learning that you need to have respect and find your space and discover what things you have to do The part in which you are more active, like, is what transforms you. While you're in class you're more passive, you're there just absorbing, sometimes you're not even absorbing what they are transmitting. (Daniela, 23 years)

The participants understood the training as an experience that permits knowing different professional

activity areas, discovering interests, directing choices inside the course and related to the professional project. After starting practice, some students changed their vocational preferences, taking interest in work areas they did not even know or could not even imagine they would like.

When I started, I was sure I was going to the structural part, I had decided ... and throughout the course, also because of my internships, much because of my internship by the way, 'cause I worked in a construction company from the start, I used to visit construction works ... The construction area seemed to be more interesting, so I ended up changing. (Camila)

Internship Characteristics

Work framework. The participants reported on the importance of the internship to get to know what a work environment is and to learn how to take part in this context. Eduardo mentioned he missed work characteristics in his internship:

Sometimes I feel that some of that notion of work environment is missing, like. Mainly now that projects were running short, there was not much to do... Also because they had not rented an office yet, so the office ended up being, they set up the office in the room of one of them. So, it ends up being a house, like. The environment is kind of, kind of outside work. So it's ... sometimes it seems, like, it doesn't look much like work. Also because of everyone's relationship, everyone has more or less the same age, so the relation is odd... sometimes it's kind of weird to say, damn, I work for them. (Eduardo, 22 years)

Eduardo indicates that his internship experience differs from most people, as that much informality in work relations is uncommon. Bianca (26 years), on the opposite, affirms that she learned to be responsible during the internships, to comply with work hours and respect standards and hierarchies. She feels secure about her capacity to deal with people and behave according to a work context. Daniela and Fabiana (25 years) also report that they have learned in their internships and in other extra-class experiences to interact with people, to solve conflicts and to take initiative.

Tasks related to the profession and variety. The nature of the tasks the trainees performed also revealed to be a relevant element for perceived development. Two types of experiences can be contrasted: trainees who perform tasks characteristic of the profession and trainees who accomplished activities hardly related to Engineering, including bureaucratic work or more operational and

less reflexive tasks. In addition, the range of tasks was associated with further learning, and repetitive tasks with discouragement to continue with the internship.

A lot of administrative work. I learned to work, but I didn't learn engineering stuff, you know?... The internship was in engineering, but I ended up going ... I knew there would be little Engineering work but, as I wasn't doing anything I decided to take it. Then it was just paperwork, documentation ... but nothing that added up to my knowledge as an engineer. (Bianca)

It's always the same activity, although the structures are all different, like. The activity I end up doing is always the same ... If I don't move further, like, it won't be that ... it's not being very good to me. (Eduardo)

The trainees who performed activities closely related to the profession showed more security referent to their transition to work, as they felt familiar with the tasks and routines.

To work, I think that the internship is something that definitely gives you a lot... It makes you much calmer to enter the job market, because you've already got that company time, you'll soon continue in the same company, you already know how it works. As I've been here for a while, I've already got, I don't know, in a while it won't change much because it has already been changing gradually. (Fabiana)

Responsibility and autonomy. The trainees' responsibility and autonomy in their activities showed to be a very important element for the development of an identification with the professional role (to feel like an engineer) and to feel more secure as to one's own competence.

It was very nice there too, but I still used to feel more of a trainee there. Because, it was like, if I didn't know something I immediately asked someone, because I worked in a room with three engineers.... I felt like a trainee because I didn't have that much responsibility. I had less responsibility. (Daniela)

I was more of an engineer, like, there. Kind of, you have a task to do, let's see how far you get by yourself, then I'll explain, no problem... Something else... how should I say... with more responsibility, looking more like an engineer, thinking like an engineer. Not here. They are always supervising to see if you're not doing anything wrong. (Bianca)

Perceptions of increased responsibility were present in the internships, not only because the trainees received more charges, that is, the companies' expectations about them changed, but also because the students themselves show more responsibility because they perceive that it is time to do that.

A project has come up now to start from the beginning, so, as they see, I'm in a transition phase in the company... because I cannot act like the other trainees any longer, it's a matter of knowledge, you know, I cannot just... they charge me a lot. They see I cannot just wait for the order, right, I have to go for it and so... which generally isn't... to the trainee you get it and say "ah, do this", as they did with me until some time ago... my boss came to present (the team to a new trainee) and said: "these are trainees" and showed the two, then I sit at an isle where there are two other engineers and I, then he said like: "These are engineers, and that one's almost". Now he has to hire three trainees, so I get all silly, right. (Fabiana)

Overcoming Challenges. The degree of challenge the tasks pose was also mentioned. In situations when the trainees felt that the challenge greatly surpassed their capacity, the reaction observed was of feeling a lack of preparation, insecure about the transition to the job market, like in the case of Bianca's most recent internship, who reports "a bit of insecurity too because... because of the work I am doing, which is very difficult". During an earlier internship, when she was able to do the tasks without that much difficulty, Bianca also faced challenges, but conquering them made her feel more confident about her performance.

In Daniela's case, who also experienced the conquest of challenges during her internship, repercussions were observed in her confidence and readiness to cope with the transition to the job market.

Work sphere: cooperation. The work environment was described as an important element in the trainees' affective bonding with the institutions and in their interest to continue. Environments with a climate of cooperation and exchange were highlighted as capable of facilitating learning and motivation at work. Informality and relaxation also figured as facilitators.

It's very nice, like, with the project superintendents because they've got a lot of experience, and my colleagues in the same function, the technical aids, it's interesting because each of us is taking a different college, then we comment on the differences between the course... And people like... everyone tries to help, you know, I like the work environment a lot. (Camila)

Relation with supervisors and feedback. In the relation with the internship supervisors, the importance of proximity and feedback was evidenced. Through feedback, the trainees received information about how to improve their performance as well as about their capacities and competencies. The action of feedback was perceived not only during explicit moments for this purpose, but in the trainees' perceptions about the direct results of their work and the team's reaction.

He (boss) is great.... He sits down a lot to talk to us, know what we're doing, college, how we are feeling. He's always giving lots of advice, about everything.... it's very nice... I have always attempted to do my job, when I need to be told off he does so... He recently told me that I was the fastest, but that I also used to leave plenty of things behind, then it's no use either, right... (laughs) (Fabiana)

You know, everywhere I went before now and now I've always felt that I was doing fine. I've always received compliments, like, and when I went away people used to tell me: "bah, you've done really well, wherever you go, you'll do fine". (Daniela)

... what you do in college is just theory, here you do it and you're able to see the application and see if you're making a big mistake, or if you're on the right track. (Camila)

Positive feedback, associated with the confidence and responsibility granted to the trainees, indicate the change towards a professional position, which is already ongoing. To give an example, Fabiana reports that she has already been "rehearsing" the transition, and that is why she thinks that it will not be that sudden. Daniela and Camila also think that their professional routines will not change much after graduating, except for increased responsibility and autonomy. "I will be the engineer" (Camila), which means that she will have to solve work problems on her own, without leaving the solution up to others.

Discussion

The results underline the importance of the internship as a part of academic experiences for the transition from student to professional. As the researchers made sure to ask about experiences that facilitated professionalization during the interviews, without directly referring to the internships, it was observed that the students spontaneously mentioned these experiences. The importance of all other college experiences for the transition to the professional role

certainly is not left aside, including subjects, field visits, participation in research groups, among others, which the participants also mentioned.

What distinguishes the internship from the other experiences is its nature as a work trial, when students can apply theoretical knowledge to practice and actively assume responsibilities. The learning gained from internships effectively turn into skills and competencies that contributed to the feeling of being prepared for professional practice. The internship also helped to define interests and elaborate professional projects more clearly, resulting in gains in terms of vocational exploration, which permitted greater confidence towards the future.

Although all dimensions of career adaptability (concern, control, curiosity and confidence) influence and are influenced by the quality of academic experiences, curiosity and confidence seem to be more related to the benefits of the internship and to the construction of the bases for the transition to the professional role. Curiosity, considered more specifically with regard to its relation with vocational exploration, refers to the process that makes individuals get to know themselves, the job world and to contrast information from the environment according to their preferences. Through exploration, they construct their own identity (Taveira, 2000), can develop interests and try out activities that permit putting to proof their own skills to accomplish and gain satisfaction from certain tasks.

Exploration is a core process for college students to be able to ask themselves about the type of professional they would like to be and, based on that, seek experiences and reflections that are capable of clarifying this response. Ceasing to be a mere student to turn into a professional fundamentally implies exploring. To define interests and skills referent to the profession, the hypothesis test needs to be put in practice, imagining oneself in different contexts and trying out different professional activities, through which personal preferences and one's own identity are consolidated and changed. In that sense, the internship figures as a fruitful area for vocational exploration. This study evidenced that some characteristics of the internship experience facilitate exploration, as an environment of cooperation, while others hamper it, such as the absence of activities related to the profession. Therefore, it is important not to consider that the internship alone will promote relevant learning for the construction of professional identity, as this is possible provided that some conditions exist that enhance vocational exploration (Angot et al., 2008; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008).

As regards the characteristic called "work framework", excessive informality and diffuse hierarchical relations make it difficult for students to get to know what a workspace is and to experiment themselves in that space. The opposite

was also verified: trainees who had gone through a work experience in a formal and well-organized environment felt more familiar with the responsibilities and routines, and also more confident to satisfactorily perform a professional function. Therefore, through exploration, individuals make basic movements for the role transition, such as getting familiar with the work universe. In that sense, the literature has indicated the importance of work experiences for the development of college students' practical competencies, as these prepare them to take part in the job market (Angot et al., 2008; Fior & Mercuri, 2003; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Mihail, 2006).

As regards the theme "tasks related to the profession and variety", it was observed that experiences that permitted doing activities similar to those demanded from professionals did not only allow for the development of technical skills and competences, but also the construction of a self-image as professionals capable of complying with the work requirements of their activity area, according to the participants' reports. This sense of professional preparation reflected in expectations of less abrupt changes to formally enter the job market. Therefore, involvement in work activities related to the profession facilitates the school-work transition, to the extent that it favors the identification with the professional role. Caires and Almeida (2001) indicate that internships permit more real and integrated contact with the different facets of the profession, and represent an important rehearsal of the professional role for students. In the literature, it is also informed that organizations capable of providing students with a realistic preview of work activities support their preparation process to assume the role of workers, as they permit raising very approximate expectations about the professional role to be performed (Ng & Feldman, 2007; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008).

When proposing tasks detached from the profession during the internships, such as bureaucratic or repetitive activities, one may be stimulating precarious inclusion in the job world, as students do not develop the necessary knowledge and skills. Although these internship experiences often permit contact with a work environment, they do not allow students to occupy a distinguished position but, on the opposite, pass them tasks that go beyond practice in their specialty area. This does not contribute for students to project themselves into the future as confident and secure professionals. The literature acknowledges the importance of high-quality internship experiences for future "survival" in the job market (Caires & Almeida, 2001) and for employability within the graduation area (Angot et al., 2008; Davies, 2000; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Mihail, 2006).

Task variety showed to be an important element for the trainees' development. The possibility to circulate among different company sectors, to perform different

tasks and deal with new situations, as opposed to a hardly novel routine, entailed perceptions of learning and professional preparation. Therefore, diversity, as a characteristic of the traineeship, is directly associated with vocational exploration and the development of curiosity. A reciprocal influence is observed between the context and the individual: the internship can offer diversity because of its characteristics, and the individual, by making choices and acting in the environment, can actively seek diversity to be part of his/her education. Thus, departing from the internship, the student or both, it is observed that task diversification can offer a range of options for trainees to experiment and assess the results of these reality tests (Super et al., 1996), comparing the work options they are interested in. Then, they will be able to translate their self-concept more easily in occupational terms (Super et al., 1996). Brooks et al. (1995) observe that task variety in internship environments is one of the characteristics associated with self-knowledge.

Internship environments with a friendly and welcoming climate show to facilitate exchanges among trainees and between the latter and other workers. Therefore, it is relevant for institutions to offer a space where asking is not threatening and trainees feel at ease to participate and contribute to the work team. Thus, vocational exploration will also be facilitated, as one can know much more about the work when one is part of a team in which cooperation exists. No references were found in the literature to this exact aspect of internships, but studies exist about the importance of socialization processes to integrate new workers in organizations and in work itself (Gruman, Sacks, & Zweig, 2006; Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Nicholson (1990) observes that informal socialization, involving peers, is more effective to allow candidates to explore and take part in new work routines and tasks.

Besides curiosity, confidence is a fundamental dimension for the transition to the professional role. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) affirms that feelings of confidence about oneself (self-efficacy) are important sources of motivation for human behaviors. Professional self-efficacy, which relates to the belief in the capacity to perform professional roles, is associated with individuals' position towards the transition to work – whether optimistic and confident or insecure. In that sense, it is important to understand how college experiences contribute to the development of professional self-efficacy and to the identity transition process. Therefore, some internship characteristics will be highlighted which the interviewees mentioned and are related to the theme.

This study evidenced that, for the study sample, the greater the responsibility and autonomy they are granted as trainees, the more they feel they are playing their

professional role, at the same time as they perceived the confidence their bosses vested in them. For the students, being treated as responsible and autonomous means that the supervisors are supposing they have knowledge, are prepared and can actually perform the professional role. This trust relation showed to be relevant, indicating that the view of other meaningful aspects referent to the trainees helps to consolidate their changed view of themselves (Stryker & Burke, 2000). One may presume that, thus, supervisors and teachers anticipate students' development. In other words, students are not yet capable of fully mastering the tasks they receive, but nevertheless receive the tasks, and this stimulates their development towards the mastery of professional competencies and the conquest of professional self-efficacy.

Overcoming challenges in the internship also showed to be associated with increased professional self-efficacy and readiness for the transition from student to professional. On the other hand, the experience of challenges that imposed much greater difficulties than the trainees felt capable of handling was associated with low professional self-efficacy. This finding helps to understand why the internship can be related with increased or decreased professional self-efficacy (Caires & Almeida, 2001).

The feedback received, in turn, reinforced the students' perception that they performed their tasks efficiently and helped to identify aspects on which they needed to improve. As indicated in other studies (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008), feedback exerted positive effects by contributing to vocational exploration of oneself and to professional self-efficacy, that is, for the trainees to gain further elements to identify pertinent skills pertinent to the profession and to trust their own performance, fundamental aspects in their advance towards their professional role.

Conclusions

In the internship experiences under analysis, characteristics were identified that can positively influence career adaptability and professional role transition. The work framework, tasks related to the profession and variety, the cooperative work sphere, responsibility and autonomy, overcoming challenges and the relation with supervisors and feedback were the main aspects mapped. In other studies, the importance of autonomy (Angot et al., 2008), socialization (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008), task variety and feedback (Brooks et al., 1995) were also highlighted in the internship experience to promote career development, mainly referent to a clearer self-concept and increased self-efficacy.

Based on the internship characteristics identified in this study (as well as in others) as capable of influencing role transition and career adaptability, a research and intervention tool could be formulated to assess the quality

of the internship experience. The aspects mapped in this research, such as the work framework, task variety, feedback, refer to elements that could be assessed in other contexts, as these are cross-sectional themes relevant to the transition to the professional role, although they originated in a small group of students from a single course. The elaboration of a quantitative instrument would grant access to countless and diversified samples, which would grant further knowledge about the quality of college students' internship experiences. The tool would also be interesting as a guide to help professionals conduct internship supervision and career counseling processes.

Among the present study limitations, the fact should be highlighted that participants came from the same course, institution and city. In addition, as participation was on a voluntary base, the self-selected sample may also have influenced the results. Therefore, the results presented here should not be considered representative of any professional education or internship situation. Nevertheless, they indicate possibilities that deserve to be investigated in other contexts and with other populations (students from private higher education institutions and other courses for example), through qualitative as well as quantitative approaches. The knowledge area would also benefit from longitudinal studies, capable of monitoring students' career development issues across their academic trajectory, as well as the long-term impact of educational experiences.

Some possible implications of this study for practice would be as follows: the inclusion in higher education institutions' pedagogical project of formal internship management, based on the acknowledgement of its fundamental role in professional education. This implies training academic and local supervisors to work in trainee monitoring and development, as well as promoting activities that enhance students' exploratory behavior throughout their undergraduate program and internship, including proposals for mentorship relations (Linnehan, 2003) between teachers and students and monitoring among students from different course phases (Pereira et al., 2002).

The importance of interventions is highlighted to prevent career development difficulties, since the start of the academic trajectory, sensitizing students to the need to use college experiences to build their careers. Group interventions like workshops can be used as spaces for reflection and exchange, in order to facilitate the students' career planning, time and study management. Finally, the conceptual lenses of the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) and the role identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) can be adopted for individual career counseling. In all suggested interventions, a guiding principle exists, which points towards the importance for educational agents to heed the development of career

adaptability as a key competency for students to become professionals and learn to conduct their careers across the lifetime.

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