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Research workshop
Methodological debates in research on vocational identities¹

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Abstract

¹ Since March 2000 a research project "Vocational Identity, Flexibility and Mobility in the European Labour Market (FAME)" (contract number HPSE-CT-1999-00042) has focused on the vocational identities of employers and workers in different professional areas in several European countries. FAME is funded through the 5th Framework Programme of the European Union, with the aim to investigate how increasing flexibility and mobility in European labour markets affect the development of vocational identities.

Since January 2001, a research project "The formation of vocational identities in Social Guarantee Schemes. The impact of changes in the educational sector in the processes of vocational training (IDELAB)" (contract number SEC2000-0801) has focused on the vocational identities of teachers and trainers in Social Guarantee Schemes, in the working conditions provided by the institutions offering those schemes, as well as on the vocational identities of the students receiving training in such schemes. IDELAB is funded through the National Programme of R+D of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology, with the aim to investigate how new jobs in the world of education have an effect on the vocational training provided by those occupying such jobs.

This research workshop focuses on the study of the formation of vocational identities in educational settings. This is an issue common to two lines of research funded by the EU (5th FP) and by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology. The presenters of this workshop are members to the teams of both research projects, and the discussant is member of the international team of the European funded research.

The workshop focuses on methodological issues embedded in both projects: how to access workers, employers and young people in order to find out about their views on their vocational identities, how to identify the relevant elements contributing to the formation of such identities, how to gain knowledge on those aspects which are crucial for the processes of identity formation. The workshop will introduce the audience to the tools the teams have used for data gathering and will then deal with the problems we have found when interpreting and analysing the information.

Summary

Two research projects in which the presenters are taking part are currently working on how vocational identities are formed. The presenters are studying such issues in the region of Comunidad Valenciana, and they have already done the following:

FAME. 30 interviews were conducted to managers in companies in three occupational areas (hotels, car maintenance and supplies, and departments of radiodiagnostic of hospitals). Following this, in-depth interviews have been conducted to 90 workers in those companies. During this process, we conducted also questionnaires to all teachers of these areas in vocational education schools in the region. We also conducted a series of activities with all students in those areas, related to their expectations on the profession they are currently studying and how they are forming their own identities.

IDELAB. We have conducted similar research work in a very particular context: the Social Guarantee Schemes in the region. These are one-year educational schemes for young people with no degree training for a profession at a level 1 qualification. There are approx. 200 schemes in the region, and we gathered data from 60 of them as follows: a questionnaire to managers of the schemes, a questionnaire to educators and a questionnaire to workers training young people for those qualifications. This being the first phase of the research, we then run a second round of data gathering, this time using in-depth interviews which were conducted to 72 of the trainers and educators. The remaining phase will consist of approaching young people in order to find out how they are forming their vocational identities.

We have used a series of research tools consisting basically of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. A biographical approach lies behind our effort, as identities are formed through time and in relation with others; and we are interested in checking the relevance of training and of learning, both formal and informal, in such processes. Furthermore, the expectations raised and the career prospects are also a crucial element in the study of vocational identities, because they are the base upon which further training is decided and they point at the relative role of work, of one's profession, in relation to other areas of one's self.

These elements are of particular interest when dealing with professionals of education: teachers, trainers and educators, specially those training young people for a job (qualifications 1 to 3), not a career (qualification levels 4 and 5), are important because their views on work will be taught to young people, who will then be confronted to personal histories, not only to teaching material or to the skills which they are to be competent. Beyond each of the tools we have used for our research, it is very important to try and keep them together, to make a relational use of such tools: here is where we come to our main research problems.

The meaning of a text is not being once and forever. It is needed to contrast the text of my life with the text of other lives. Interpretative comparison is fundamental to give meaning to existence
(Bárcena and Mélich, 2000, p. 109).

INTRODUCTION

In this research project, we intend to get feedback and critical comment on two research projects on vocational identities. We have used a qualitative approach in both of them, yet both entailing differences for the object of study and the scope of the research. We have had to choose which approaches suited our aims best, considering narrativities of different kinds, like life histories, content analysis or social discourse analysis.

‘Human time is not a simple sequence of instants, moments, ‘nows’. Human time is a interplay between past, present and future. Action may be narrated, may become an argument, a narration, precisely because it is time’ (Bárcena and Mélich, 2000, p. 108).

We will describe here the methodologies we have finally used and will inform you about our problems when handling them, referred to data gathering, interpretation of the data and presentation of the results.

In order to do so, following Gallart (2002) we will describe each of the projects, explaining what the research design has been in both of them –the definition of the context and the units of analysis, the intended level of analysis and the hypothesis and assumptions behind our research-, the processes of data gathering –including the definition of the cases to observe and compare, the criteria to select sample groups, the tools designed to obtain the information and the strategies to approach the informants-, our understanding of the observation units –professional communities, organizational units, the social categories to which the individuals belong-, the fieldwork process –our attempt to capture processes, not only the version of the actors, to register the language of the actors while keeping it different from our own assessment of their views-, the registration of the information –our attempt to comprise all relevant information, to facilitate our analysis and to allow us to go back to the original sources and reinterpret it; as Gallart says, to get a ,puzzle to be put ensambled and dismantled and reensambled, but always keeping the original pieces’ (2002, p. 344)-.

In our analysis, in both projects, we have tried to keep the original language, to grasp the definition of the situations researched as viewed by the actors involved, to grasp their

views of their histories and conditions, to identify their strategies to cope with them –whether they were or not conscious-.

We started our work in both projects by looking at previous research. Despite there were common elements between both projects, our search brought us down through different lines of analysis, for the different composition, expertise and scientific interest in both terms, for what might be useful for the whole research as well. Yet, we have also shared a partially common background of theories and concepts: Dubar (1991, 1995), Sainsaulieu (1995, 1997), Sennett (2000), Carruthers (2000), Castells (2000), Francfort et al. (1998).

In both projects, we decided to take into account as the units of analysis entities which shared a set of common criteria which provided for similarities in the areas of interest of the study, yet allowing for a maximization of features which would allow for establishing internal comparisons. We were also looking for the integration of individuals' strategies within intermediate structures –the companies they were working for-.

As a result of our participation in both projects, we are being able to explain what has been observed, and we are trying to do so by the development of typologies, to arrange the cases and allow for particular hypothesis: these types have a theoretical nature, yet they have an empirical ground. It is hard to find any of those 'pure' types in real life, yet all what will appear in them has evolved from the data we have gathered. They are, therefore, a selection, or combination of elements which have appeared in the fieldwork. In this sense, they have been built for research purposes, in order to facilitate the analysis and comparison, to look for the differences rather than for common elements.

These will allow us, we hope, to grasp identity processes of people at work, to understand them and contrast them with literature in the field. These will allow us, we hope, to understand people's strategies in order to cope with the structural conditions in which they are located at work, taking into account both their fears and aims as well as the planning of the effects they expect to raise from their actions as they preview and try to configure their working and life futures. Again following Gallart, when developing these typologies of strategies we may find strategies that are not explicitly said, that arise from the analyses the researchers perform on objective situations, the discourses of the actors, also related to their behaviours and their consequences.

Yet, when presenting this paper we are yet facing some difficulties, many of which are related to the presentation of the results: the huge amount of material we have –in the case of FAME in seven different languages-, the different sources of information we have handled, the attempt to produce a theoretical discourse upon a complex object like vocational

identities, the risk to summarize information which will mislead further attempts to understand what needs lengthy descriptions to (re)present the problem in context, the provisionality and idiosyncrasy of the results. Not to forget about the audiences to whom these results may be worth presenting: from the very actors involved in the processes to others in similar positions, the scientific communities which may be interested in the issue, yet with different approaches and perspectives. The cost of such a research approach is great, yet there are a few criteria which support it: to allow for a thorough understanding of the issues, the legitimacy of the results, the comprehension of the processes and situations in which the actors take part; as well as the consideration of the perspectives of different actors, which helps contrasting positions and perspectives to limit the biases. Again following Gallart, one of the main values of this research is the use of criteria for analysis and explanation which are related to the sample where the sources of information are, thus combining the theoretical as well as the empirical ground, facilitating also the validity and objectivation controls in the very process of data gathering.

THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH: THE CASE OF FAME.

Under the framework of the research project “Vocational identity, flexibility and mobility in the European labour market –HPSE-CT-1999-00042”, we have conducted research in three sectors undergoing important changes in the regional labour market. Our objective was to analyse the construction of vocational identities in some important and innovating sectors in the a regional context, as the case of tourism, metal and radiodiagnostic for the Valencian Community.

The framing context for FAME objectives is the fast changing demands for workers identity in the global labour market. The key questions, that were discussed in preliminary meetings, were the identity formation processes in a time of change and the responses those processes were demanding from individuals in different occupational groups; as well as what does an occupation in changing sectors mean for the employees’ lives, and what are the skills, attitudes and strategies they need to cope with those changing situations.

These main questions drew a complex picture: from educational pathways to opportunities and needs, through work-related reference groups and career expectations. All

of those were also taken into account from different countries in the European Union, which meant an heterogeneous cultural matrix for the research which may be described as follows:

CZECH	ESTONIA	FRANCE	GERMANY	GREECE	SPAIN	UK
Tourism				Tourism	Tourism	
IT Telecomm	IT Telecomm	IT Telecomm	IT Telecomm			IT Telecomm
	Health / Nurses	Health / Nurses	Health / Nurses		Health / Radiographers	Health / Nurses, radiographers
	Metal industry Timber	Metal industry	Metal industry		Metal industry Automobile related industries	Metal industry

Not only we had different sectors to study, the expertise of the research team in each of the countries varied also widely, comprising areas such as sociology, labour market assessment, vocational education, economic aspects of vocational education as well as psychology.

So, we found at least four factors to be taken into account in our work:

- Objective and subjective issues around labour identity formation processes.
- Different cultures and economic dynamics in each country.
- Different sectors (with heterogeneous structures, organization and personal dynamics, and cultural issues).
- Different academic approaches (including both theoretical and methodological perspectives).

All these questions were asking for a systematic and coordinated work, which took into account methodological coordination -common criteria for the sampling, production of tools, procedures of analysis and ways for presenting the results- as well as theoretical coherence –to allow for the coordination and common construction and discussion of research findings-.

How did we conduct all these issues in our project? What were the main difficulties in it?

1. Preliminary phase.

Preliminary meetings dealt with four issues:

a) Coordination level.

The mayor concern was to which degree the partners needed to agree upon a certain level of coordination and harmonisation of the different methodological approaches applied during the interviews.

Some of the project partners favoured a no-agreement approach, leaving it to each partner to choose the method best suiting the respective cultural context. Others preferred a more coordinated methodological approach. Decisions at this level influenced how the partners would select the interviewees and how we would conduct and evaluate the employee interviews. In the end, a common methodological frame was accepted.

b) Key areas.

Partners reached an agreement (provisional at that moment) on the four key areas for guiding the process of gathering the data. These key areas intended to provide a framework that could guide the semi-structured interviews:

- Learning (background, orientation to learning and knowledge, and especially learning related to working processes);
- Relation to work (attitudes, orientation to work, performance of role, organisation);
- Interaction with others (relation with colleagues and others);
- Appraisal or evaluation of current situation (self-reflection; orientation to own performance).

One question was if these four areas needed to be further specified to ensure compatibility of interviews across the partner countries. But choosing the semi-structured interview as the tool for data gathering, we opted for an open approach. Given that we were looking for employees' discourses, we had to respect different contexts and cultural settings for constructing information. Then the compatibility would be reached working with an agreed set of categories for analysis as well as through the ways of presenting and sharing the results.

c) Selection of the sectors.

It was based upon each partner's report of interesting changing dynamics in main sectors in their country and/or regional contexts. The agreed criteria at this level were:

- To be useful for the analysis of FAME assumptions;

- To be an innovating sector;
- The relevance of change in the sector upon working conditions.

In the case of the Valencian Community, the sectors were tourism (hotel workers), health care (radio-diagnostic) and metal industry (automobile-related industry):

d) Pilot interviews.

Each partner conducted a series of pilot interviews (approximately six) in each chosen sector, in order to assess the feasibility and validity of the methodological approach chosen (and discussing it with partners for getting a common approach); to see if the outcomes were useful; and to get ideas for constructing a definitive interview guide.

2. Second phase: approaching employers' views.

In order to have a panoramic view of the sector, and to have a contrast approach on the discourses of the employees, in this phase we started from the employers' views of the sector and the needs of workers in it.

We made focused interviews to ten employers or high managers per each sector (approximately, 30 interviews). We understood that in this way we would get the formal discourse of some companies, that were the context in which workers' identity develop, as well as the milieu for us to conduct interviews with employees.

The interviews dealt with common issues for all the partners:

- Data concerning the company;
- Work organisation;
- Recruitement criteria (what kind of employees is the company looking for);
- Human recourses management;
- Changes in work and professional requirements;
- Continuous education and training.

The evaluation criteria of those interviews were discussed, and some questions were clarified: the need of having into account the view of structural changes; the comparison between sectors; to look for the changes and to relate them to identity, flexibility and mobility issues.

However, considering the wide field and range of structural and personal aspects which affect the process of occupational identity formation, the project consortium had to find an

operational frame to evaluate the material. The evaluation of the employers' perspective focussed on three key dimensions, which are critical for the process of identity formation:

- Learning: How formal and non-formal learning are perceived by employers; how do they appreciate qualifications acquired through the initial formal learning system; how do they promote, assess and take into consideration further work related learning; to what extent the workplace constitutes a poor or rich learning environment; the effect of the latter on employees' work-related identity formation and development in particular, and their socio-professional promotion in general.
- Organisation: Dominant organisational structure of the institution; dominant work organisation; forms of related labour flexibility and mobility and their effects on employees' identity formation, learning and socio-professional promotion; perception of hierarchy; career options.
- Individual: Initiative; autonomy, responsibility; communicability; time and functional flexibility; mobility (promotional as well as horizontal); forms of identifications (with product, service, team, company, professional community...).

In each case, all these dimensions would be regarded to their capacity to influence on and their need for mobility and flexibility.

3. Third phase: getting the views of employees.

At this stage, we worked with the employees' perception of the sector and their vocational identities. We expected that the previous phase would show some of the hard-to-solve tensions and contradictions arising for individual employees from structural and ideological demands and from the fast changes in occupations and workplaces.

Therefore, in this phase on the employees' perspective, the questions were:

- If and how employees develop strategies to cope with these possible contradictions?
- How do such strategies look like?
- How do they affect the identification and commitment with work?

We made 31 interviews (semi-structured and focused) in each of the three sectors per country. We based the selection on the workers trying to focus on the companies in which employers had already been interviewed, in order to facilitate the contrast on data and to improve the quality of them, having more contextual information to anchor them. We tried to

cover different ages and gender, as well as different departments in the companies, several functional positions, as well as employees with and without formal responsibilities. As regards qualification level, we tried to cover different situations, but all workers were positioned in jobs for which, nowadays, there exist a recognized vocational qualification (initial, VET or university).

In the sector of hotelry, we interviewed thirty one employees among hotels with a minimum of two stars. As a whole, the interviews took place in eight hotels, all of them located in Valencia or the surrounding area. The ages of the interviewees varied from 21 to 57. There were 14 women and 17 men. Ten interviewees worked in reception desks and departments, seven of them in the kitchen, four of them in restoration services, seven of them in several management departments (commercial, booking, staff etc.) and four of them in cleaning and maintenance areas. 14 of the interviewees held some kind of responsibility, in the form of intermediate management.

In the sector of radiodiagnostic, we conducted thirty interviews to workers in the radiodiagnostic departments of both private and public hospitals. As a whole, we conducted the interviews in five hospitals, two of them private, three of them public. Interviewees' ages ranged from 22 to 50; there were 23 women and 7 men. All of them had the appropriate vocational qualification –level 3- through formal initial vocational education. Most of them –sixteen- worked in the radiography department or in the emergency room (eight of them); only two of them handled more modern technologies (one in CAT and one in MRI); and four of them did have positions not clearly specified. Finally, with regard to their labour situation: nine workers held unlimited contracts (either laboral or civil servants), five of them temporary (replacement contracts), eight of them interim and eight of them were subcontracted as autonomous.

In the sector of metal-mechanics, we conducted 31 interviews to workers in workshops, both in a large factory owned by a US company as well as dependent of official car dealers and small workshops. The ages of the interviewees vary from 22 to 57, all of them being men. We conducted the interviews in seven companies. The functional profile is as follows: five heads of workshop, three commercial and administration employees, three trade officials (two mechanics and one in sheet and paint), four second class officials (two mechanics, one electrician and one in sheet and paint), six first class officials (four mechanics, two electricians) and three mechanics and two specialists in sheet who did not specify their level. All of them are in jobs for which there is nowadays formal initial vocational education.

The structure of the interviews was agreed to consist of an individual focused interview (opened but with a guide) exploring the four key focus areas (learning, organisation, autonomy/responsibility and individual strategies to deal with changes and demands). The interviews content was analysed in a systematic and comprehensive way. This analysis started from qualitative categories that were defined from the interviews discourse and some theoretical contributions². The result was a series of key factors (see the picture) in the vocational identity discourse of the workers. These factors were agreed at a project meeting as the analysis criteria, and allowed us to define discourse patterns of vocational identity.

Our objective was to identify, on the basis of the qualitative analysis, the principal discourse patterns that shape distinct basic types of professional identity. These types should be understood as “pure types”, which serve as tools for next analysis. They were not intended as an exhaustive typology of identity; rather they constituted a basic definition of types that allowed us to organise the most relevant factors that appeared in the interviews.

² Beck, U. (2000), Dubar, C. (1991), Sainsaulieu, R. et al. (1995), Bourdieu, P. (1999), Sennett, R. (2000).

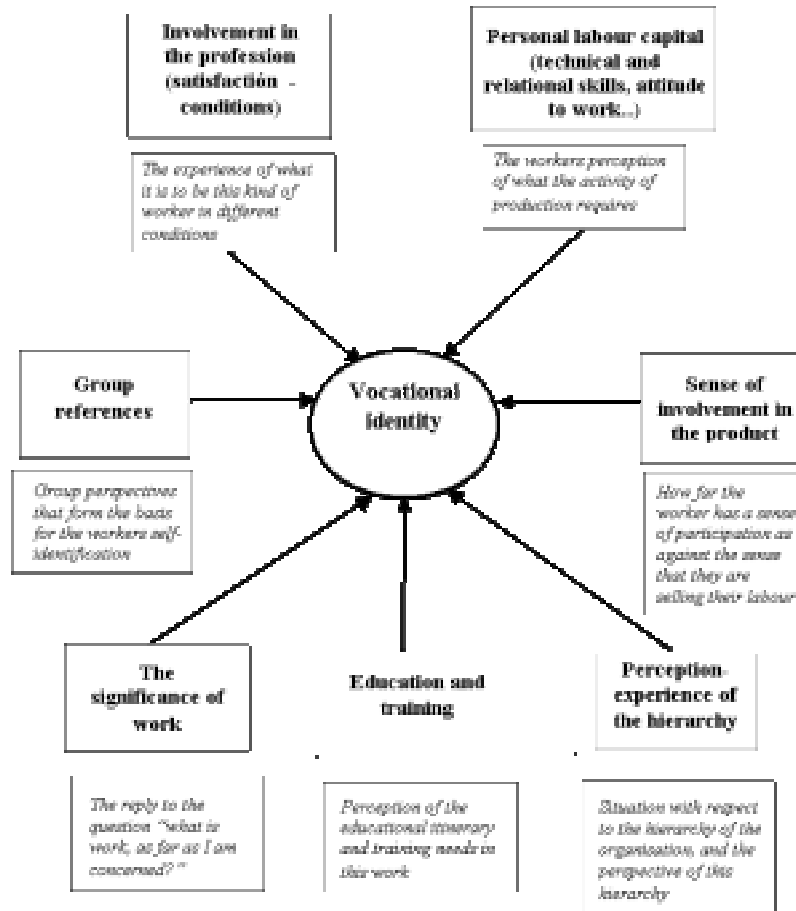


Figure 1. Key factors for a mapping of professional identity

4. An appendix for the third phase: approaching VET teachers and students.

At the same time that we were interviewing employees in the companies, we intended to approach also VET teachers and students in order to get an overview of what was the impact of the issues of our study upon current VET practice in the sectors studied, as this might give an added value to our research (Kim Cho and Apple, 1998; Popkewitz, 1988; Eisner, 1998).

On the one side, some of the teachers in the VET system may be at the same time professionals working in their sector of expertise. Furthermore, given the new model of vocational education in Spain, it was not strange to assume that some students would be workers trying to achieve a formal professional accreditation which they lacked in the moment they entered the profession.

For this contrasting research, we intended to find grasp issues like what notion of work is taught in current VET courses; what notion of work develop VET students –including area such as the specific activity to perform, social relations at work, labour relations (conflicts,

wages), what is demanded of them (flexibility, adaptation, continuous learning)-; as well as the sort of work experience and introduction into the world of work that they were getting.

We then decided to send a questionnaire to all VET schools in the region teaching the professional qualifications at level 3 preparing for those professions in which we were interviewing employees. We decided also to address all students in the region who were studying the subsectors of all three professional families in FAME (health: radiodiagnostic; metal mechanics: automobile industry; tourism: restoration and hotelry). The tools we designed for students consisted of three different classroom activities –in the subject area named ‘introduction to the world of work’-: a) an open debate upon the case based on a story of a worker in the sector –arising from the pilot interviews we had conducted with employees-, b) an open collective commentary on a series of slides showing different real working situations in the professions for which they were training, and c) a brief individual questionnaire dealing with some of the issues we were addressing in the in-depth interviews with employees. This information was recorded in tapes and transcribed, while the questionnaires to teachers were sent by mail.

In order to build those instruments, we used different sources of information like our pilot interviews, their curricular prescriptions -professional profile and contents of the modules-, the collective bargaining agreements -except in the case of radiodiganostic, for which there was none-, as well as FAME related papers -conceptual, views of employers, developments in the sectors-.

For metalmechanics, we got information from 14 different schools, where 280 men and 2 women took part in our research, ranging from 16 to 37 years old. Also 45 teachers from 18 schools (25 of which have worked in the sector; their overall ages ranging from 20 to 61) replied to our questionnaire.

In the case of tourism, we got information from 9 different schools, through 50 women and 36 men, ages 16 to 45. We also got a reply to the questionnaire from 27 teachers from 11 schools (18 of which have worked in the sector; their ages ranging from 27 to 57).

In the case of radiodiagnostic we got information from the two schools where that qualification is taught, with XXX, their ages varying from 18 to 50. 75 teachers from 22 VET schools teaching health –not only radiodiagnostic- replied to our questionnaire (51 of which have worked in the sector; their overall ages ranging from 26 to 65).

THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH: THE CASE OF IDELAB.

This project intends to identify changes in vocational identities and practices of trainers and trainees, in the understanding that such changes will happen as a consequence of the transformations that the educational sector is suffering, particularly in the area of vocational education and training.

We have chosen as our research context the case of Social Guarantee Schemes, because they are an educational offer which intends the professionalization of young people with no accreditation. They have a recent history, as they started only in 1994, being regulated by the Spanish Educational Act of 1990.

Our research approach is that of qualitative research (Alonso, 2000) and from an interdisciplinary perspective: there are social psychologists, developmental psychologists, sociologists and pedagogues in the research team.

The questions that made us start this project are the following:

- To describe the emergent trends in vocational training systems considering current reforms in the educational system and in the labour market;
- To describe Social Guarantee Schemes within the frame of the policies set to facilitate transition from young people into the labour market and adult society in general;
- To analyze the features that define the trainers in such SGS;
- To describe the basic keys that are shaping vocational identities of young people attending such programmes as well as their trainers: their views on work and how they understand themselves as workers and as collective groups defined by a professional/vocational dimension;
- To provide useful information to take decisions on the design and management of policies addressed towards social and labour insertion of young people.

It is our assumption that the educational system has resulted more reluctant than other sectors in the labour market to flexibilization, innovation and experimentation of new types of management and new sorts of practices. Nonetheless, it is the educational system itself that, to a large extent, has provided the human capital able to satisfy the demands and requirements of a labour market under the process of rapid change. This has led to a disadjustment between a) the representations of work that trainers have and teach to their students and the representations of work that are embedded in the institutions in which they work, highly bureaucratized, fragmented and formalized, and b) the demands and expectations that employers have regarding their future workers. To be aware of this problem and to misuse

economic and human resources has led in the past decades to a continuous effort towards decentralization, flexibilization and to facilitate innovation in all levels of the educational system. As a consequence of this effort, the development and scope of the educational system has expanded far beyond its traditional area of influence. Also as a consequence of this, the vocational identity of trainers and educators in the educational system is currently suffering a process of deep transformations. This is even clearer in educational areas traditionally considered as peripheral to the system, that are usually those which are oriented towards professional training rather than academic teaching, with education out of school and with training offered to young people who have failed in the educational system. It is in these areas where flexibilization, decentralization and administrative deregulation and innovation in the types of management is greater and has accelerated nowadays (Bárcena and Mélich, 2001; Bernstein, 1998; Bolívar, 2001; Casey, 1993; Paugam, 2000; Gorz, 1997; Crespo, 1998).

From our perspective, these are some of the transformations in the nature of educational processes in vocational training that we must look at in detail in order to describe and understand them, so that we are able to preview the effects in the medium and long term of the trends in the wider educational system and the structure of the labour market.

In order to understand and preview these changes, SGS offer us a great chance to study and analyze how and towards where such transformations are happening in the educational processes of construction of vocational identities of young people attending new forms of education and training out of the traditional academic pathways. It is also a privileged *milieu* in which to look at the transformations of vocational identities of trainers and educators, which do take part of the wider socioeducational sector which is nowadays expanding.

Social Guarantee Schemes are particularly relevant for this purposes in the Valencian region for the following reasons:

- They are different with regard to other forms of vocational education and yet they have as an explicit aim the professionalization of young people –despite this is not the only aim, competing with reentry into the educational system and personal development-. This is why socialization in the traditions and uses of the world of work is an important element in the curriculum together with specific training in an occupational profile;
- They are flexible in the way they are funded, regulated and organized: there is a scarce level of formal regulation which makes it possible for us to find out many different forms in which promoting institutions run these training mechanisms;

- They systematically differ according to their relation to work: there are up to two different forms of working practice out of the educational setting: education and training –a working contract- and introduction to a profession –work placements-; both of them approaching the world of work differently;
- They allow a wide array of labour conditions, so that we may assess them and their implications upon the construction of vocational identities and of understanding work;
- They are addressed to a population which is very young and with very low professional qualifications and expectations;
- Each programme has two trainers well differentiated: a teacher providing basic education and skills and a trainer specialized in the occupational profile of the programme; both figures seem to differ systematically in their representation of the educational aims that are important to work with the trainees, and they allow to contrast references about vocational identities and the cultures of work;
- Finally, the wide array of occupational profiles offered under the Scheme allows also for the coexistence of programmes aimed to traditionally handcraft occupations together with other emergent qualifications usually referred to as ‘new labour pools’.

For all these reasons, we approached our research trying to make the most out of our interdisciplinary cooperation, also through the use of a plural methodology and the triangulation and contrast of the perspectives of the different agents involved: trainers, teachers, managers and trainees; as well as the mentors of the students at the workplaces.

We have developed three major phases along our research work:

1. Preliminary phase: setting the context of research.

We included here several research tasks:

- A historical and comparative contextualization of current policies for sociolaboral insertion of young people;
- The empirical description of the policies of SGS developed in the region in relation to their structural and organizational aspects, taking into account the changes in the regulations as well as the trends shaping the sociodemographic and labour profile of both the promoting institutions as well as the trainers working in them;
- The analysis of the potentials and specificities of SGS in the Valencian region compared to their management and regulation in other regions in Spain, all of these

read within current policies for facilitating entry of low qualified young people into the labour market.

2. Second phase: researching vocational identities of trainers.

The aim of this phase consists of obtaining information allowing us to describe the variety of trajectories and vocational identities that find themselves among those playing the role of trainers in SGS, and to point those in relation to the strategies they employ and the emphasis they put in their educational practice. That is the reason why we chose to interview some trainers, after having obtained data of their socioprofessional status and practice through a questionnaire.

The interviews have a pretty detailed guide, adapted to the interviewee and to the course that the interview follows. The interest of the interview is to cover certain areas rather than to get an answer for certain questions. The interview guide includes the following topic areas: a) autobiographical information, b) current working situation, c) vocational identity data, d) professional practice and their own assessment of it, e) their views on their addresses, f) their perception of their vocational identity and how they refer to it, g) their perception of what does a SGS consist of, h) motivations and significance of work and their social representation of the labour market, i) their representation of the educational system and its relation to the labour market and, j) their assessment of their personal situation.

By the end of June 2002 we had interviewed 14 trainers, and we intend to interview a similar number during this term. Those 14 people work for seven different institutions and programmes. We decided to take the programme as the unit of analysis, that is why we have taken both the teacher and the trainer in each Scheme. We chose those particular schemes trying to maximize 'a priori' the diversity of vocational identities we might find among trainers. Therefore, we tried to a) get workers from all types of institutions running SGS –public secondary schools, private secondary schools, non-profit organizations and municipalities-; b) that each SGS would cover a different occupational profile in order to get as different as possible a trajectory of trainers in them –varying from electricity to shopping, metal welding or gardening-; c) to get institutions from either Valencian metropolitan area as well as from rural areas in the region; and d) to include at least one SGS attending young people with psychological education needs, given that this is a particularly differential area. Taking into account those criteria, we chose seven programmes among all those active last

year and we wrote a 'reserve' list of other ten in case there were any problems with these. All of the institutions and workers agreed to take part in the research.

Two members of the research team conducted the interviews, in two sessions each, transcribing the first session before the second one so that the interviewee might comment on this transcription. The period between both sessions was of approximately a fortnight. We chose to do so for several reasons:

- the total length of the interview –from two and a half hours to four hours- was far too long for a single session;
- the space between sessions could allow us to 'individualize' questions for the second session. The first session focuses on biographical aspects, current working conditions and tasks of the workplace. The second session tries to focus on the trainer's discourse on the benefits and aims of the scheme, her view on the education system and the labour market, her own assessment of her labour and job and some subjective issues on the significance attributed to her work. These questions of the second session are harder to talk out loud, so the first session might provide us with certain elements to raise these issues.
- To go back in the second session on certain elements needed of further investigation; and
- To allow the trainer to modify, amend, reformulate, make clear or change the transcriptions of the first session.

This strategy has brought us some problems, as the reactions of people between interviews are different, also the second session has proved to be not so easy as the first one for the 'individualization' of the areas of inquiry. Yet, we consider it a 'experiment' worth it.

3. Third phase: researching vocational identities of trainees.

Here we are trying to use the information obtained in previous stages of the research in order to find out about the process of identity formation of young people with particular regard to the occupation they are training for. This is a complex area of inquiry because of certain developmental issues: the ages of most trainees implies that many of them are yet developing their identities in many regards, not only the occupational, and those should be taken into account.

Young people at these ages are involved in processes of exploration and developing trials when compromising with certain areas of their own identities. Furthermore, their own experience of work is probably a limited one, mediated through their own training in the SGS.

Therefore it is important to find out about their views in different moments throughout their stay in the scheme, to consider the chance of changes happening as a result of the educational action. We are also considering the convenience of going back to these young people a few months after completion of the programme, to find out about more changes to have happened along that period.

Because these young people have suffered bad educational experiences with a record of failure, we will try to inquiry in all these areas of our interest in such a form which does not result ,invasive' to them, to try and get their views in their own languages, something which is often ,alien' to academic work (Cachón, 1999; Falcón, 2001; Feixa et al., 2002; García, 1994; Rodríguez, 2002). At the same time, we are trying to get this information which others among a group of youth which others did not reach (Toharia, 2001).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS WE FACE.

Every narration is always a narration of something, of something which may be said, nevertheless, in many ways. Narration demands, in this sense, plurality and freedom of selection and election of diverse viewpoints. It is inherent to the essence of narration that there are variations to it. By this element of freedom, narration is the opposite to a documentary. This freedom that allows to narrate is not a mere arbitrariness, but a demand which comes from the listener. Because this one, as 'other', is important for that who tells, for the narration itself, it is in her interest that the narrator communicates with her. Communicates and makes her take part making her be part of the narration inviting her –or provoking her- to interpret it.
(Bárcena and Mélich, 2000, p. 122).

The definition and understanding of vocational identities is not the same in both projects. This is possible by the differences in methodologies and scope chosen by each team. There are different readings at the background of each team –despite there are commonalities too-. Furthermore, because we are developing empirical work in both projects, the understanding of vocational identities is linked to the biographies of people studied as well as by the vocations and professions chosen. There are also certain biases in both projects: country, academic, ideological and methodological, and these have shown up in the fieldwork.

And there are certain elements which should require further study, like the relations of vocational identities to work performance or to family life, issues which have not been explored in neither project. We have rather focused upon people's expectations and

retrospective views on their working life. The study of vocational identity implies always relational processes which we have tried to capture while, at the same time, trying to avoid strict biographical approaches.

Through the use of qualitative methodologies we have tried to develop hypothesis arising from conceptual work as well as from empirical work. In the process of gathering data in the fieldwork we have encountered certain difficulties having access to the people and the information, also inner debates in the research teams regarding the selection of tools and the criteria to get the sample: is it any better that the units are individuals or groups/collectives? How are we devising professional communities? What is the role of organizational units –or institutions? The units will serve then as the cases submitted to comparison, also as the contexts in which we will look for areas of inquiry to compare with other units. In the end, the key question is the following: Is there a social category behind vocational identities?

‘Narrative identity, belongs it to a person or a community, is the space between history and fiction. Human lives are more legible when they are interpreted according to stories that people read and tell about them’ (Bárcena and Mélich, 2000, p. 118).

With the qualitative analysis, we intend in both projects to grasp people’s positions and arguments -both their definitions and their views-. Yet, we have not been able to reach their practices in FAME, we will try to do so in IDELAB-. We are also trying to grasp the processes they are embedded in –changes, interpersonal relations- as well as the strategies they develop to face them –ther reactions and anticipations-.

In both projects, we are trying to develop provisional typologies of extracted or constructed types. We are working with discourse, so we may build typologies which show main discourse patterns. For instance, in the case of FAME, the types are tools for our analysis, not an exhaustive analyses in themselves: there may be more types, but those are the ones which have evolved from the interviews we have conducted in Spain. The situation is somewhat different when we combine these with the interviews run by our Czech partners, and our joint work with them has resulted in a relatively different typology.

A very ambitious aim, yet something we have attempted with our material, has consisted of developing a typical discourse pattern for employers, also for teachers and for students. In both projects, for we have looked for the views of different actors and with different tools, we are trying to search for congruence, triangulation and comparison among them.

,This necessary interdependence is described in a set of conversational metaphors. Simply by being other, the "other" challenges the "self": who are you? Then, replying to the

demands of the social world, the self can demonstrate her "response-ability"; answering the questions of the social world, she can establish her own "author-ity." (Casey, 1993, p. 23).

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