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Abstract

For many young people who enrol in intermediate VET (*Ciclos Formativos de Grado Medio* – CFGM, ISCED3B), the transition from compulsory education or other alternative programmes becomes a complex process, where the possibility of reconstructing their academic identities positively is highly relevant. In this article we aim to illustrate the complexity of this process, through the narratives and trajectories of five young people who decide to restart a CFGM after having dropped out of previous ones. The data comes from a broader study, based on qualitative methodologies, which explores ways of constructing and reconstructing socio-school identities in a group of 19 students from the first year of a CFGM in an industrial specialty. The strategic use of expressions like «liarla» (messing about) and «rayarse» (getting wound up) in their stories shows the transition from a counter-school identity that is dominant in compulsory education to a process of withdrawal with regard to the subject in its passage through the CFGM. The entry into the new VET school culture will be marked by confusion and loneliness on being confronted by a new environment where the tools with which, in compulsory education, they «were at least someone» no longer have any value. The ways in which they try to reconstruct their school lives coherently show us how these attempts to combine past, present and future

in their stories also involve resolving the contradictions in the educational system itself, of which in part they are an effect.

Key words: Vocational education, academic identities, school dropouts, educational transitions, Initial VET, school cultures, exclusion, education system, re-entry of students

Resumen
Para muchos los jóvenes que acceden a los ciclos formativos de grado medio de formación profesional (CFGM), la transición desde la educación obligatoria u otras vías se convierte en un complejo proceso, en el que la posibilidad de reconstruir positivamente sus identidades socio-escolares ocupa un lugar relevante. En este artículo pretendemos ilustrar la complejidad de este proceso, a través de las narrativas y trayectorias de cinco jóvenes que deciden reiniciar un CFGM después de haber abandonado otros. Los datos proceden de una investigación etnográfica más amplia, basada en metodologías cualitativas, que explora las formas de construcción y reconstrucción de las identidades socio-escolares en un grupo de 19 alumnos del primer curso de un CFGM de una rama industrial. A través del análisis de sus discursos, observamos como el uso estratégico de las expresiones *ser de los que la liaban* y *rayarse* muestra la transición desde una identidad contra-escolar dominante en la ESO, a un proceso de repliegue sobre el sujeto en su paso por los CFGM y tras sus primeros abandonos. La entrada en la nueva cultura escolar de la formación profesional estará marcada por el desconcierto y la soledad ante un nuevo entorno, en el que las herramientas con las que en la etapa obligatoria al menos "fueron alguien" ahora ya no tienen ningún valor. La forma con que intentan reconstruir de manera coherente sus trayectorias escolares nos mostrará como estos intentos de conjugar presente, pasado y futuro en sus historias y encontrar una posición en su discurso, implican además resolver las contradicciones del propio sistema educativo, del que en parte son un efecto.

Palabras clave: Formación profesional, identidades escolares, abandono escolar, transiciones educativas, CFGM, culturas escolares, exclusión, sistema educativo, reingreso escolar.

Introduction

In the Spanish educational system, intermediate level of VET courses (*ciclos formativos de grado medio* - CFGM) are the option for young

people who, after completing compulsory secondary education (ESO), choose to pursue professional training (ISCED3b, in the international standard classification of education). In addition, the CFGM have become an important means for returning to formal training for many young people and adults who left school without any qualification (Valiente, 2014). Despite the remarkable increase in enrolment in recent years, data such as that of the State System Education Indicators (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2014) shows that gross rates for qualifications at this stage are still the lowest in the educational system.

This fact provides us with evidence that many of the young people fail to finish their studies, or find it difficult to do so in the period provided by the system. The data does not explain the variety of circumstances that may have arisen (changes in CFGM, incorporation into the employment market, repetitions, etc.), but rather shows a situation that relates specifically to this stage and that deserves specific attention.

Although the CFGM usually form part of the measures aimed at reducing early school leaving rates, there are no indicators that assess their effectiveness in this purpose (Carrasco and Narciso, 2013). The invisibility of the specific problems of this stage reflects a significant imbalance between the education policies for access and policies for retention if we consider that the CFGM are still, in our educational imaginary, a second chance for young people with schooling histories that show a lack of interest or are deemed to be poor performers.

Sometimes the CFGM become the preliminary stage of a costly rite of passage into the adult world of employment. In this sense, repositioning young people in society as productive subjects can be complex, especially when those who occupy the lowest ranks in a precarious employment system find neither symbolic nor instrumental compensation.

The early leaving from a CFGM or the difficulties many young people encounter in them require an analysis in terms of their specificities as a transition, considering how risk factors acquire particular meanings on coming into contact with each educational context (Brown and Rodriguez, 2009). If it has not been possible to establish definitive causal relationships between risk factors and abandonment, and it is likely that these are indicators of more complex processes (Häfeli and Schellenberg, 2009), perhaps this complexity can be explained by means of the meaning that these factors can acquire in the process of constructing and reconstructing the social-school identities of the young people. The

transition to the new learning context involves changes and ruptures that the young people have to undergo along the way, and their difficulties can be analysed from the standpoint of a lack of sense or based on the conflicts of identity that can occur during the process (Zittoun, 2008).

In the sections that follow we address some aspects of this complexity, by analysing the discourse of five young people who begin a CFGM again after dropping out from others. Firstly, we will briefly present a number of prominent points taken from the literature related to our approach. After setting out the methodological aspects and the context of our research, we will present the results of our analysis, focusing on how the young people give their experiences coherence and how they relate to the problems of the transition to the CFGM. Lastly, in the discussion and the conclusion to this article, we will relate our results to the effect of sociocultural aspects and tensions in the educational system that end up being highlighted individually in their personal accounts.

Identity and individualisation in the transition to the school cultures of vocational and training education

Acquiring a positive school identity has been considered a key factor in keeping young people in the school system (Finn, 1989). Aspects such as school organisation, the type of privileged knowledge, the expectations of the teaching staff, or the relationship with the peer group, are key factors when it comes to considering the ways that young people position themselves, with their own expectations and origins (Wexler, 1992; Whortham, 2006).

The literature focusing on the socio-cultural aspects of VET has highlighted the relationship of these processes of identification with exclusion and selection, implicit in their goal of socialising young people for employment (Bates, 1991; Colley, James, Diment and Tedder, 2003; Vincent and Braun, 2011).

Interpreting learning as a social process linked to a transformation of its participants (Lave and Wenger, 1991) will be a basic premise for understanding the dynamics involved in identifying young people within a particular *learning culture*, i.e., «a particular way of understanding a place of learning as a practice made up of the actions, dispositions and interpretations of its participants» (Hodkinson, Biesta and James, 2007,

p.419). How one understands what teaching is, how one values what learning is, and what socio-cultural references are linked to the ideal worker in the professional culture of each speciality will be core aspects. Being «the right person for a job» and acquiring a «professional habitus» (Colley et al., 2003, p.488) involve a process which, more than academic knowledge, involves a negotiation between the self-perception of the young person and the attributes that govern the regulatory figures at the margins of the formal curriculum. This entails adjustments, but also intractable conflicts, in which power relationships and uneven resources for negotiating play a central role (Colley et al., 2003, p.492). These processes take on a specific dimension on moving on to CFGM, not only because of the relevance of the decisions in the young person's future career, but because these are made at a moment of transition filled with uncertainties about how to define oneself in the adult world (Cohen-Scali, 2003).

Considering the difficulties of young people in these stages as the result of the meaning given to the meeting between their expectations and those of a certain culture of learning is not something that is exhausted in the environment of the school and in its daily dynamics. These difficulties are inseparable from systemic factors, such as the barriers that the design of the educational systems themselves may present (De Graaf and Van Zenderen, 2013; Jørgensen, 2011), or the weight of sociocultural discourses about the responsibility of the young person in successfully building his or her transition to social adulthood via work. Issues such as these pose added difficulties when starting out from unequal socio-economic and educational situations. The political and social discourses on equality of opportunity and the young person's responsibility in his or her training involve an important conceptual shift, on assuming that individuals, rather than belonging to a class, are part of a uniform citizenry in which a person is included or excluded according to their employability (Thompson, 2011). When the forms of social representation are reduced to simple participation/non-participation, political and social problems tend to be individualised (Dawson, 2012, p.307).

Analysing decisions to leave the CFGM from the standpoint of exclusion implies considering that the latter may act from different levels: systemic, institutional and individual (Jørgensen, 2011). However, the processes of exclusion tend not to be perceived as such, but rather take

the form of individual decisions, by means of which young people accept structural constraints as their own, adapting them, with some degree of coherence, to their personal narratives (Jonker, 2006;) De Graaf and Van Zenderen, 2013).

In this article, we analyse some of these issues, situating them at a precise moment in the trajectory of five young people who decide to start a CFGM after dropping out of others. Based on the concept of identity devised by Dubar (1991), and defined as «...the result that is at the same time stable and provisional, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structural, of the various processes of socialisation that together individuals build and define institutions» (Pag.111), our perspective consists of analysing the socio-cultural aspects of the school environment that affect the critical transitions to the cultures of learning in the CFGM, with these being understood from a scaling standpoint (Hodkinson et al, 2007) and as a place of transition, where young people should make an intense effort to reconstruct their previous school identities.

Method, criteria and participants

The data used come from a broader ethnographic study, aimed at exploring the processes of reconstructing the social and school identities of a group of young people in the first year of an industrial specialty of CFGM[1]. The field work was carried out over nine months of the 2012-13 school year in a public secondary school located in a suburb of a city close to the metropolitan area of Barcelona. 19 students aged between 16 and 40 participated in the study, together with five teachers from the teaching staff.

The field work was carried out using qualitative methods, based on observation in classrooms, workshops and other areas of the centre and by conducting semi-structured interviews that were aimed at the participants at various times throughout the school year. We obtained the informed consent of the participants under a commitment of confidentiality, and for this reason we have avoided being more specific

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[1] This paper is part of the author's PhD research that is being carried out within the FP7 Project RESL.edu (Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe, 2013-2018), coordinated at UAB by Dr. Silvia Carrasco.

with regard to the location of the centre, and the names that appear in the article are pseudonyms.

The results we are presenting are from interviews conducted during the first term of the school year. These covered socio-demographic aspects, school/work biography, motivation and expectations. By analysing interviews with 19 students, we were able to distinguish four logics that guided their participation in the course: a logic of improvement, a credentialist logic, a logic of continuity and a logic of change. The concept of logic was inspired by Dubar's logic of action, understood as the type of rationality that gives coherence to past practices, current ones and those envisaged in the future in education/training (Dubar, 1992, p.511). In order to identify it, we took three aspects into account: elements indicating a constructed employment and/or school identity, the meaning given to their presence in that course and the type of future projection made. Significant variables were the socio-economic moment at which they finished compulsory education (ESO/EGB), the type of previous work experience or not having had any, the problematic experience of their past schooling, and having gone through periods of employment and training inactivity. These logics explained the different attitudes in the new course: a heightened commitment on being faced with the possibility of enriching professional projects already begun (improvement logic), a sceptical pragmatism towards those who already received qualifications in other courses but had only known the precariousness of the employment world (credentials logic) or simply continuing in the system after the ESO, with a professional project that is still very unclear in terms of their expectations (logic of continuity).

We will focus here on five youngsters who share the logic of change: Jonatán y Abdel, 18; Moha, 23 and Iván and Ricardo, 21. We chose this group since they presented previous examples of dropping out and because they had the greatest difficulties in integrating in the course. All of them had dropped out of between one and three CFGM previously, and had experienced periods of inactivity in terms of employment and training (from six months to two years). In none of the cases was there any formal contact with the world of employment, only some sporadic work in two of them, helping friends or relatives.

Their socialisation via school had been negative, and via employment non-existent. They were burdened with an image of being a poor student, which they attempted to overcome by means of a discourse that criticised

their past and presented the new course as the beginning of a stage that would change their trajectory, being associated more with a personal change than a specific professional project. Four of the youths had managed to complete the ESO after repeating and with board approval at the end of the stage, and only one of them (Jonatán) failed to finish the ESO, and accessed the first CFGM by entrance examination.

Regarding their socio-economic situation, they belong to working-class families that, in four of the cases (Jonatán, Ricardo, Abdel and Moha), were experiencing economic difficulties during the course. Their fathers had worked in low-skilled jobs related to the construction industry and were unemployed. In three cases, their mothers worked (two working as domestic cleaners and one as a shop assistant). The fifth case (Ivan) presented the most stable economic situation, since the father and the mother had an occupation (transport & services).

A discourse analysis has been applied to the texts produced as a result of the interviews, taking into account their expressive dimension (Jociles, 2005) and understanding the discourse as «a conduct expressing subjectivity (a model and/or a cognitive, evaluative and emotional attitude) and is the product of the socio-historical praxis» (Jociles, 2005, p.22). In our analysis, we focus on the aspects of the discourse aimed at producing coherence and its fissures, as narrative acts in the context of the interview and as a work of narrative composition which, drawing our inspiration from Gubrium and Holstein (1998), involves both the resources with which the story is organised, and the available meanings, the storyline and links that are «made coherent» in their personal accounts.

Being one of those who messed about: a normal thing for a boy, right?

The most recurrent image of these five youngsters for defining their path through the ESO was that of being «the kind that messed about»:

> *Ricardo: I was a boy, and I was one of those who messed about, you know?*
> *Int.: And what do you mean by messing about?*
> *Ricardo: Well, I don't know, behaving badly, right?*
> *Int.: And what is behaving badly?*

Ricardo: (laughs) well, I don't know! Not listening, fooling around with...a lot of things.
Int.: But, for instance, it's possible to not listen without messing about, isn't it?
Ricardo: I don't know. Acting the goat, in other words. A normal thing for a boy, right?
[Ricardo/pif/25-10-12]

They associated this attribute with a childish, socially justifiable attitude which placed them in a different present, using a discourse that was somewhere between condescending and sanctioning and that reinforced the credibility of their project of change in the presence of the interviewer, although in some cases the convergence of this positioning and the subjectivation of a counter-school identity were situations that were not fully resolved:

Iván: Well, my mother was very cross, but that's normal isn't it? Because now I think about it, I'm, in quotation marks, ashamed, because I said I could make good use of the time and not do that.
Int.:Yes?
Iván: Of course. I think about it now... and now I wouldn't do things like that. Maybe yes, mess about a bit, but not in the way that I did mess about, because I've always, I mean, all my life I've always been the typical tearaway and the like, but... now things are different. Now I think about it and I say, well maybe it wasn't so good.
[Iván/pif/04-12-12]

The centrality of this counter-school image in their stories about the ESO revealed key aspects for understanding how they thought about their school past and the effect this could have had on their transferral to the VET courses. These involved two aspects: the latent idea about their inability to study, and an understanding of the world of school world based on docility-conflict that will be limiting. Both of these revolved around an argument they shared in their accounts: they failed because they messed around and not the other way around.

Research such as that by Kaplan, Peck and Kaplan (1997), based on the central frustration - self-esteem theme put forward by Finn (1989), has shown precisely how the negative interpretations of standards at schools are those that end up generating attitudes of disaffection and

negative effects on self-perception. In the case of these young people we can only know what they tell us, yet the insistence with which they stressed that, despite everything, they were not «thick» or that they were «worth something« meant that, at the very least, they had accepted the expectation of being identified as incapable as a reasonable one. Neutralising this possibility with sound arguments, based on what secondary school teachers said, was necessary, although this implied having accepted other labels that they were willing to present as part of their «personality»:

> *Jonatán: Because the teachers told me that if I don't pass it, it's because I don't want to, because I have the ability and… that if I don't get it, it's because I was a slacker.*
> *Int: That's what they told you, that you were a slacker?*
> *Jonatán: Yes, that I was a slacker, and I was a slacker.*
> *Int: And you believed you were a slacker?*
> *Jonatán: Yes! and I still think I'm a slacker! But well, now I've changed a bit, you know?*
> [Jonatán/cap/30-10-12]

Presenting oneself as slackers or tearaways was the result of a negotiation that involved not only the image projected in the context of the interview but also the positioning from which they attempted to reconstruct their project of personal change in the new course. However, this position rests on a fragile base, on which the suspicion of their lack of ability will emerge when being «one of those that messes about» fails to explain why they end up abandoning their initial CFGM.

For these five youths, who had failed to find a place at school where they could construct themselves positively, being lazy or «one of those that messes about» becomes the best alternative when faced with the prospect of being labelled as incapable. These identifications were significant, as opposed to students, employing different logics, who on having gone through difficult periods in the ESO, justified them by means of a critical discourse about the school or other external factors. Not having gone through periods of school inactivity, although they had changed their course (logic of continuity), having already obtained a CFGM qualification and some kind of precarious work (credentialist logic) or having been able to develop a positive social-employment identity

(improvement logic), were determinant variables in their ways of presenting their pasts at school, compared to these five young people for whom passing the course involved a personal change.

In addition, their experiences in compulsory schooling had structured their understanding of the social and school world in the conflict-comformity sphere, a place from where they articulated their proposal for change and for being a «good student»: one who did not mess about. This idea also resonated in the ways in which they highlighted features related to the avoidance of conflict when they were asked what they thought a good worker should be like:

> *Because what you have to do... is that no..., I don't know, someone who does things well, listens, behaves, right?*
> [Ricardo/pif/25-10-12]
> *Simply being... being on time at work and of course not having conflicts with workmates, getting on well, being punctual, doing things properly, I mean like... making ant effort in what he's doing.*
> [Iván/pif/04-12-12]

During that course, however, the image of the docile student that they proposed had a low exchange value in the economy of identity (Wexler, 1992) which governed the course. Understanding its rules was one of the major difficulties, in a sphere where the attributions of the teachers, those of the peer group, those experienced by them and those they now proposed were intertwined.

In our study we see how these identifications underwent shifts of meaning, reflecting the prevailing value systems in the course they were beginning: between «an academically deficient ESO pupil» and «incompetent worker», between «good student» and «adult student with professional experience», or in the manner with which the students classified "big" students and «young» ones, which was related less to age, than to ways of being in the school space associated with social values about adulthood constructed from the idea of responsibility at work.

With no work experience and a precarious school identity, these young people shared a situation of disadvantage when it came to interpreting these meanings and identifying with their images.

Reconstructing themselves in terms of docility was not enough, and reflected a scarcity of resources for interpreting the new learning culture, something which was also present in the experiences in their first course.

If in the ESO they had faced a kind of visible authority which could clearly respond to with an anti-school attitude, the possibility of opposing this attitude in their initial courses fades on being faced with a type of authority which reacts with indifference:

> *Int.: And the teachers from the other course, what about them? Were they harder? Were they the same?*
> *Jonatán: It's not that they were harder, but rather they didn't give a damn about you. If you didn't do anything, then they didn't care about you and they ignored you, you know? Which is what I did. Actually, it's normal, you know? If you don't want to take advantage of the time, the teachers are going to be looking out for you.*
> [Jonatán/cap/30-10-12]

From messing about to getting wound up: withdrawal by the individual

If being *one of those that mess around* implied the ability to act upon the school environment and «be someone», in their explanations about the CFGM any clear form of identification disappears, and the reasons for its failure fall back upon the individual. From the child who is rebellious but in the end clever as his or her image in the ESO reveals, we turn to the image of a young man paralysed on losing control over a learning environment where his ESO tools do not work. The reflexive form in Spanish of the verb *rayarse* (getting wound up) appears in his explanations as a metaphor that condenses this turn around in his discourse.

> «*At the beginning, I wanted to do a course of... well... physical education, you know?*» *The one of..., but it turns out it was in XXXX and stuff like that, and going to XXXX, I don't know, I'm not into that... and so I signed up for electricity here, and I've ended up studying with people much older than me, but a lot, 40, 35, and there were none of my age, you know? And I me... I got really wound up man, I studied on my own there and didn't know anyone... I got wound up a lot, so I packed it in man. (...) I felt I was all by myself on that course, yes.*" [Abdel/pif/15-11-12]

«Being wound up» occurs after a variety of vague and contradictory

circumstances appearing in his explanations (classes being in the evening, having to travel to the city, have adult classmates). These explanations end up being anecdotal once confronted by arguments that break the fragile consistency of his descriptions of a rebellious but clever child inn the ESO, as is concluding that in the end he didn't pass the ESO by his own means («It's a miracle that I managed to pass the ESO» [Moha/poli/22-11-12]; «the teachers said, the lad isn't stupid, we are going to give him the certificate and let him get on with it, right?» [Ricardo/pif/25-10-12]) or calls into question his ability to study («No, no, I didn't like it, I found everything very difficult. It requires a lot of studying, and studying isn't for me, no way...» [Jonatán/cap/30-10-12]).

«Getting wound up» is a metaphor that refers to meanings related experiences that are difficult or awkward to explain, associated with a loss of control over the new learning environment and with loneliness («I stopped going. I didn't fit in there, you know? I didn't know where I was." [Ricardo/pif/25-10-12]), towards an unbearable experience («It's something you say: if I stay here any longer I'll go crazy. No, no, I just didn't see any way..." [Iván/pif/04-12-12]) or to a particular form of boredom («you mess about when you're very bored» [Abdel/pif/15-11-12]), that is sometimes expressed as something that happens when faced with a perspective of failure, and that leads to a disconnection:

> *Moha: The problem I have is that when I mess about I disconnect.*
> *Int.: What do you mean you mess about?*
> *Moha: Like when I don't like something, or I see I'm not going to pass it or something, I say that then I disconnect.*
> [Moha/poli/22-11-12]

Their discourses suggested a withdrawal by the individual that acquired different inter-related dimensions in a sequence of their lives that had still not ended. For some this sequence is prolonged for years, as in the case of Moha and Ricardo, who had tried to study three and two courses respectively before arriving at the current one.

The feedback between a limited subjective perception of their capabilities, and an objective limitation of their possibilities, not only leads to them narrowing their expectations, but to a progressive reclusion in family spheres or those close to them. These spaces will limit their options, and the new and little-motivating choices they make for training will again end up in them dropping out.

Despite the fact that dropping out frees them from an unbearable situation, their periods of educational and employment inactivity end up being an extension of the disorientation they have experienced. These periods will be narrated as confusing experiences, parentheses that appear not to count in social time, where what they do is considered as «nothing», and where no kind of activity is considered:

> *Well I don't know, I was all day...I don't remember very well, but I was at a dead stop yes, I didn't do anything. There wasn't much to do, I couldn't do many things as well.*
> [Abdel/pif/15-11-12]
> *Ugh... well, watching the telly, on the computer or of course... no... (...) Yes, I've had and mmm...I mean I told myself told me that no... I don't like to be, or I don't want to go on like this, but of course... then I thought ugh... of the things that there are, almost...*
> [Iván/pif/04-12-12]
> *I didn't do anything. I went out, walked about and in the evenings with my friends. I wasn't concerned about anything. I was lost. At those times I was lost.*
> [Ricardo/pif/25-10-12]

The neighbourhood and its surroundings end up forming the boundaries of the «subjective geographies of their opportunities» (Green and Whithe, 2008, p.222), as the only place for training or searching for work; work that never comes, with their social capital reduced to close networks of friends and family; also in a precarious situation, and with training opportunities that are limited to what is offered by the school nearest to their home.

In four of the five cases the choice of the course that they begin in the 2012-13 year is determined by closeness to their place of residence («I had to do something and I said to myself, well I'll come here it's close to home and if I'm lucky, and look... they accepted me» [Ricardo/pif/25-10-12]). Ivan, the only one who lives in an area that is different from that of the secondary school, will return to the centre where he dropped out of his first course after a course in plumbing in the Mancomunidad, where he states that he discovered that what he will now study is more appropriate for him than his first choice, a CFGM in image laboratory («it didn't look like it was for me» [Ivan/pif/04-12-12]). He associates

plumbing with things that happen in the 'normal' life, a reason why he enrolled in the new course, related to this professional field:

Int.: And did you like these courses (plumbing)?
Iván: Yes, because, mmm... I don't know, as they were things that could happen to me in life, in normal life, that is, for example, welding, whatever, or... having to change the pipes in something, so I said, well... let's try it to see what it's like (...) this basically, the course that I'm doing, I mean... now yes, I like some things, but... basically I do it because I think that it might lead somewhere, not because I initially said: wow I've got to do this definitely!
[Iván/pif/04-12-12]

Going back to studying becomes an urgency that reflects the experience of the exclusion experienced or that they sense that they may experience: feeling left out of the group of friends from the neighbourhood («well, seeing how things were, seeing how I was, and I saw that my friends had started to move, and I said, shit!») Well, I'm not going to be the stupid one that...that..." [Ricardo/pif/25-10-12]) or access to consumer goods that aid their sociability, as in the case of Jonatán, whose parents have been unemployed for a year:

Int.: And what difference is there between this year and last year?
Jonatán: well....more than anything for me, I've changed my way of thinking. I've realised that there is no work, and unless I study, I'm not going do anything, and I am not going to earn any money and I am not going to get my driving licence, I'm not going to do anything, you know? (...) I see it as a necessity more than anything else, because my parents can't give me money, because for example if I want to go out, because they can't give me money, and I have to look out for myself, you know?
[Jonatán/cap/30-10-12]

The urgent requirements and needs arising after their periods of inactivity do not mean considering the possibility of attempting to achieve what they explained in the interviews they would have wanted to be: Iván will not be a musician, Ricardo and Moha will not be car mechanics, nor will Abdel be a P.E. teacher. Only in the case of Jonatán, the only one who did not complete the ESO in his day, those desires seemed never to have been created: "well no, I've never had any of those." [Jonatán/cap/30-10-

12].

During this process they have readjusted their expectations, using explanations that give a consistent meaning to their trajectories: the assumption that one is a conformist («I.. the thing is that I am a person who confor..., how do you say?») a conformist, you know? that it's all the same to me, that what the school is like is all the same to me» [Ricardo/pif/25-10-12]), the consideration that in the end all the courses are the same («Yes, this is OK, but it's not that there are many things to choose from, so I chose this, I don't know... it's the same.») (All the intermediate courses are the same, it's always the same»[Abdel/pif/15-11-12]), think that the course that they study is the best for them, even if they don't really like it, as with Ivan, who concludes that, when all is said and done, not only has he never liked studying, but that it is also hard for them (Moha), or the impossibility of finding a horizon of expectations far enough for memory to reach, as in the case of Jonatán.

The impact of the contradictory logic of the educational system and intermediate VET: difficulties in resisting exclusion

From «messing about» to «getting wound up», the trajectories explained by these young people show the complexity of an unfinished transition, in which the difficulty in identifying themselves positively within the learning environment plays a relevant role. This difficulty cannot be attributed merely to individual factors or deficiencies in educational standards. As Brown and Rodríguez (2009) point out, disengagement from school is a phenomenon that is mediated by the schools, and it is within each school's social order that its conditions are co-produced. In this sense, the ways in which the school environment recognises and responds to factors considered to be individual are decisive (p.221). The idea of dropping out as a result of an interactive process of «(self) exclusion» (Jonker, 2006, p.137) seems to be reflected in the trajectories of these young people, whose ways of expressing who they were and who they are, or the impossibility of doing so, emerge as a result of personal negotiations with what has been attributed to them. In their accounts, the symbolic and instrumental resources used to reconstruct their school identities during the transition to the CFGM are limited: a

precarious perception of their abilities, an understanding of the social world of the school based on the limiting conflict-docility dynamic and a shortage of legitimising identity capital outside of school, susceptible to some form of recognition in the school environment, such as we see in their perception of the periods when they are neither working nor studying. More than a lack of accumulated academic knowledge, the type of relationship they have learned to establish with the school world and with learning itself has been decisive.

However, in their words nothing appears as a result of these barriers, but rather as the product of a long process in which systemic aspects are distilled until they are perceived as individual problems that require individual solutions. In this sense, the logic of personal change with which they confront the new course is an example, and the process of withdrawal in their trajectories an effect. In their accounts, the meritocratic social discourse of the equality of missed opportunities silences any factor related to their social class or their immigrant origins, showing us the ways in which success or failure at school and the dominant social ideologies produce subjectivities.

If on the one hand, what Perier (2008) called «syncretism of the school experience» (p.12), i.e. the exaggerated importance that school success or failure can acquire in shaping subjectivities beyond school, has imposed barriers on the projection of these young people's future, on the other hand, the limited capacity of the educational context of the CFGM to adapt to the unequal conditions of access seems to ignore the fact that they require inequality of resources if the system is to be truly egalitarian (Markussen, Froseth, Sandberg, 2011, p.243).

Being «one of those that mess about» and «get wound up» are the keys for understanding how these young people are attempting to rebuild their school accounts with some sort of legitimating coherence. What kind of inconsistencies they are trying to resolve is a central point of our discussion, in order to show how these negotiations about «how to be» are inseparable from the institutional and socio-cultural barriers that specifically affect the transition to the CFGM.

Barriers and tensions on encountering a new culture of learning

In the interviews, a feeling of alienation upon arrival at the CFGM was

reflected in the expressions that, rather than targeting the academic difficulty, referred to being out of place, to loneliness, to the feeling that «it wasn't for them» or to being «lost». The feeling of having been abandoned is interspersed with that of abandoning; a type of exclusion that is constructed when there is no response from the institution or it adopts a merely assimilative discourse (Zepke and Leach, 2005).

On enrolling in a CFGM, the young person acquires an administrative and sociocultural status: from the child-adolescent he or she develops into a potential worker, facing new demands in terms of autonomy and responsibility and the professional models of each course. In addition to the values of «professionalism», being at school involves socio-cultural values that exceed the mere transmission of a body of technical knowledge (Vincent and Braun, 2011). When the ways of interpreting these values do not fit with the expectations of the young person or of the institution, the difficulty of establishing some kind of identification can lead to a failure of one of the basic aspects of learning: feeling that they are participating or that they belong (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In order for these expectations to be met satisfactorily, their learning cultures must be inclusive, something that clashes with the exclusive idea that the CFGM are places of selection in the face of a demanding labour market; suggesting an unresolved tension between social and economic objectives, something which is particularly relevant in the CFGM.

In addition to these selection processes, where socio-cultural aspects play an important role (Bates, 1991; Colley et al, 2003), for young people who feel these values as alien to them or fail to understand them, integrating them requires a great personal effort, whose reward, being «something» they could not choose, is not enough. The school system, however, presupposes that any «non-academic» young person will accept their fate on any intermediate course, faced with a limited offer and a low average access mark. Their stigma of being a poor student in the ESO exposes them to a sort of moral demand from society, that of quickly becoming a productive subject, a pressure that is sometimes unbearable for a 16-year-old. For some, wandering from one course to another without solution is not only a way of exploring possibilities; it is also a way of delaying an undesired fate, extending a state of liminality or threshold in which anything is possible.

The CFGM continue to be the choice considered as being the most suitable for those who have not completed the ESO with the expected

results; something accepted by young people themselves in the interviews, but also by the teaching staff, as we observed when we attended the final evaluations of the last year of ESO in the same school. The dilemma between passing low academic achievers, in the hope that they will obtain a place on an intermediate VET course, or not passing them and dumping them onto the street or onto alternative programmes that are few and far between and with little formal validity, is a frequently encountered one. In these deliberations there is an implicit perception of the CFGM as a place where «you do things with your hands» with a low level of demand, reflecting a dichotomy between studying and working, between the practical and the theoretical, that is deeply rooted in our culture.

This perception is an important socio-cultural barrier that organises the relationship that young people considered to be «non-academic» have with learning, and is related to their frustrations in the first months of the course on seeing that the reality of their curricular development is quite different. This type of relationship with learning not only predisposes them to fail when faced with «theoretical» modules, but can have an impact in a limiting on the way of valuing training in their future careers (Sappa and Bonicxa, 2011, p.626).

If the teachers in the last year of ESO have to solve a dilemma between what we could describe as academic and social criteria, the CFGM teachers are faced with the complex task of redirecting these young people's history of disaffection with school in two years and turning them into «skilled professionals». Until a few months earlier, these young people had had different kinds of school supports (remedial classes, tutorials and educational psychology, etc.), but in September, on arriving at the CFGM, it seems that none of this is considered necessary since the educational administration, in the context of our research, does not provide these resources for these stages despite the fact that they are aimed at young people who have had the most difficulties in compulsory education.

Dropping out, in one of its multiple layers, can be interpreted as an effect of these contradictions, since these courses are imposed upon young people in conditions of educational inequality, to be later excluded for not being capable, especially the first year of the CFGM, in a kind of revolving door to nowhere which, as we saw in the young people in our study, can further limit their expectations.

Conclusions

«Getting wound up» and dropping out means the beginning of a process in which the expectations of these five youths are readjusted. Firstly with the confirmation of something they already knew: that they are not good students, and then with the new significance that this fact acquires on coming into contact with the learning world of the courses: now they are also unable to carry out the profession they have just chosen, or the one they were perhaps talked into choosing.

The long trajectories of these youths and their successive drop-outs could be interpreted as a costly process of accepting the place that, from school onwards, has been assigned to them in the working world. Yet at the same time, their failed attempts to return to education can be interpreted as a form of resistance to becoming excluded; a dilemma that seems to be resolved in their trajectories by limiting their expectations after their experiences of dropping out. In this sense, the cases analysed not only provide us with indications about certain aspects that affect their drop-outs, but also of the consequences of these drop-outs when there is a lack of sufficient resources in the young person's family, school and social context that will facilitate access to significant alternatives, options or guidance.

Now the urgency is to «do something» to «be someone», and this, for the moment, entails closing an unfinished process in which the question about how to behave in the CFGM has to be resolved in the face of the impossibility of resolving any other legitimising social identity, for example through work. However, «doing something» and «being someone» is not just a matter of personal choice, but rather depends on, to begin with, the boundaries established by the conditions under which they choose what to do.

Resolving the contradictions of the system, accepting a perhaps undesired destination, resolving an acceptable image of themselves in their transition to adulthood and avoiding social exclusion, are complex issues in whose analysis structural factors such as social class or the immigrant origin of some of the young people are without doubt decisive, although they require attention which exceeds the pages of this article.

With the reconstructed fragments of the story of these five young people we have tried to show how from *messing about* in the ESO to

getting wound up in the CFGM there extends a diffuse space that is impossible for them to interpret other than by recurring to their shortcomings and impossible to adjust in your explanations other than by renunciations; solutions that only reproduce their situation. In fact, none of them will complete the course they begin.

If in our introduction we posited an imbalance between education policies for accessing and those for retention in the CFGM, these young people are an effect, when the educational system does not consider the distance between the student it presupposes in its discourses and the diversity of young people entering via its practices. In terms of the school system, these retention measures should perhaps start, as Sappa and Bonica insist (2011), by reconciling these young people with learning (p.634) and, in this sense, in the specificity of the CFGM lies their greatest opportunity at the same time as their greatest risk.

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