

Basic level VET programmes: a tool against the risk of Early School Leaving in Spain

Jesús A. Alemán Falcón

Abstract

In the last years, Spain has been suffering a serious economic crisis that is reflected by high unemployment rates, especially among young people. Many of these young people have a low educational level because of Early School Leaving (ESL). The Spanish dropout rate in 2013 was 23,4%, the highest in Europe Union. The Spanish Central Government passed the Organic Act for the improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE, Spanish acronym). One of the most important measures of this act is the creation of Basic level VET programmes. They are aimed to reduce ESL rates and they allow students to complete their skills for lifelong learning and acquire the necessary training to obtain a professional qualification level 1 of the National Catalogue of Vocational Qualifications. Firstly, we will show how the VET system is structured in Spain. In the second place, we will present how the Basic level VET programmes are regulated. Finally, we conclude that a right implementation of the Basic level VET programmes can be an effective tool against ESL.

Keywords: Early School Leaving - VET system - Basic level VET programmes - National Qualifications Catalogue.

Introduction

In the last years, Spain has been suffering a serious economic crisis that has left a deep trace on our society. This crisis is reflected by high unemployment rates, especially among young people. Many of these young people have a low educational level because of Early School Leaving (ESL).

To face this economic crisis, the Spanish Central Government decided to reform the General Education Act and passed the Organic Act for the improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE, Spanish acronym) at the end of 2013. One of the most important measures of this act is the creation of Basic level VET programmes (BOE, 2013). They are aimed to reduce ESL rates and replace Initial Vocational Qualification Programmes.

The structure of the Spanish VET system

Basic Level VET programmes are part of an integral system of professional training which is described in this paper. This system is rooted in the Organic Act 5/2002, of 19 June 2002, on Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training (LOCFP, Spanish acronym), developed by two Royal Decrees establishing two sub-systems: initial VET programmes in the educational system (BOE, 2007a) and VET programmes for employed and unemployed people (BOE, 2007b).

Initial VET programmes in the educational system are funded by the Ministry of Education and Autonomous Communities. Their main aim is to train students to work in professional environments. VET programmes for employed and unemployed people are funded by the Ministry of Labour and Immigration and seeks to provide lifelong training for unemployed and employed people, improving their professional skills and personal development.

Diverse institutions fulfilling different roles regulate these two sub-systems. On one hand,

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Professional Committees for Education and Employment (Ministerio de Administraciones Públicas, 2006) coordinate and carry out high-level negotiations between Autonomous Communities and the State—that is, Ministers of Education and Employment and the Central Administration of the State (represented by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, and the Ministry of Employment and Immigration). On the other hand, the General Board of Vocational Education and Training is composed by the main institutional agents—state and autonomous—concerned with vocational education and training, from Central and Autonomous Administration to entrepreneurs and trade unions (BOE, 1997). As an advisory institution, its objective is to propose measures for improvement of the system. Another important function is developing the National Vocational Training Programme.

Besides these institutions, two more play a crucial role in the Training for Employment: the Public Employment Service (SPEE, Spanish acronym), the main state consultant in this area, and the Tripartite Foundation for Training in Employment (BOE, 2007b), that helps the SPEE to manage employed workers' training. However, there is one state institution that stands out because of their ability to invigorate Spanish VET programmes: the National Institute of Qualifications (INCUAL, Spanish acronym) (BOE, 2002). This institute is the central core of the system and fulfils vital functions such as developing and updating the National Qualifications Catalogue, and the related Modular Catalogue of Vocational Education and Training. The National Qualifications Catalogue allows the identification of the most meaningful professional qualifications in Spain, and describes them in terms of the competences needed for employment in a particular sector, with the purpose of organising them into sectors and levels. In this catalogue, the Employment Administration offer educational opportunities for occupational certificates, while VET programmes are the responsibility of the Educational Administration.

Occupational certificates (BOE, 2003; BOE, 2008a, BOE 2011) are accreditations of professional competencies listed in the National Qualifications Catalogue and acquired through work experience; they can also be obtained through non-formal training or by continuing VET for employed and unemployed people. They are official, with validity in the whole national territory and are issued by the Public Employment Service and the competent organs of each Autonomous Community. These certificates confirm professional competencies in the development of a given work activity relevant for employment. The rationale behind this is to provide workers with required training and to make the certificates reflect reality.

VET Diplomas are obtained once the following courses are completed (BOE, 2013):

- a) Basic Level VET, whereby a Basic Training Diploma can be obtained.
- b) Intermediate level VET, whereby a Technician Diploma can be obtained. This diploma certifies a high school academic level. According to the National Qualifications Catalogue, it corresponds to level 2.
- c) Advanced level VET, whereby an Advanced Technician Diploma can be obtained. This diploma certifies a higher non-university level. According to the National Qualifications Catalogue, it corresponds to level 3.

VET programmes are organised into different professional modules. On one hand, there are professional modules for each programme. On the other hand, we can find on-the-job training modules, one or several professional modules on career guidance, work relationships and enterprise, together with a project-oriented professional module (only in Advanced level VET programmes).

Qualifications in the National Qualifications Catalogue are organised into 26 professional sectors (BOE, 2005a). Agricultural, Building and Civil Works and Hotel Industry and Tourism are some examples. Every professional sector groups different VET programmes into different levels: basic, intermediate and advanced.

Starting from the academic year 2014/2015, Initial Vocational Qualification programmes will be replaced by the new Basic Level VET programmes (CFPB, Spanish acronym). They seek to ensure that students remain within the education system, and provide more possibilities for professional development. Intermediate level VET programmes have been designed to create a specialized and qualified workforce in the industry and services sectors. Advanced level VET programmes provide training for future highly-specialized technicians, or middle management posts in the economic sector. VET currently comprises 14 Basic Training Diplomas, 64 Intermediate level programmes and 78 Advanced level programmes. These courses have been updated in recent years so that the duration of all programmes is of two academic years, i.e. 2,000 hours.

The main advantage of Spanish VET programmes is that their curricular contents are structured into professional modules. These professional modules are comprised of subjects that focus on both theoretical and practical skills, and are adapted for the required professional, social and personal competencies. Each module is associated to several Competence Units, e.g. there are different programmes related to the maritime fishing sector. Among these programmes, there is one intermediate level VET called Technician in navigation and coastal fishing, composed of thirteen modules: some of them are specialized (Sailing techniques and communications, Coastal fishing, Ship handling and management, Navigation safety), while others are general (English language, Career guidance, Enterprise, and On-the-job training) (BOE, 2012a).

Since each module is linked to a series of Competence units, acquired through non-formal training, they can be certified via Modular training programmes.

Professional modules include priority areas such as information and communication technologies, European Union languages, teamwork, occupational risk prevention and other fields related to acquiring and developing basic competencies (BOE, 2007a). The on-the-job training professional module (FCT, Spanish acronym) aims to complete the acquisition of professional competencies acquired in schools. For this purpose, students are required to participate in real job situations and are provided with the necessary tools to enter the workforce. A school mentor and a professional mentor collaborate in the assessment of student performance in this module. Students can only attend this module once they have passed the rest of the modules in the programme.

Advanced level VET programmes include a project-oriented professional module targeted to integrate the diverse abilities and skills of the curriculum, and incorporate the competencies acquired throughout the internship period. For this purpose, students are required to complete a project that considers technological and organisational elements relevant to their field, and will receive a Diploma if successful. VET programmes include one or several professional modules on work relationships and enterprise. The objective of these programmes is to make students aware of employment opportunities, how to create and manage companies, work relationships, and basic work laws. Assessment scores are listed in whole numbers, from 1 to 10, without decimals (BOE, 2007a).

The current situation of the Spanish VET system

In the following, we will examine some figures which give us a global overview of the current workings of the Initial VET system. According to recent statistical reports of the Ministry of Education, 84,297 students attended Initial Vocational Qualification Programmes; 72.4 % accessed these studies from secondary school and the remaining percentage corresponded to students without previous schooling. As it was pointed out earlier, these programmes are disappearing in 2013/2014 and they will be replaced by the new Basic Level VET programmes. 317,656 students attended intermediate level VET programmes, and 300,632 students attended advanced level VET programmes. Across Spain, the average number of students per class is 20.8 (intermediate level) and 21.4 (advanced level) (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2013a). If we compare this information with data from ten years ago, we observe that there is a considerable increase in both supply and demand. There are currently almost one hundred thousand more students in intermediate level VET programmes, and seventy thousand more in higher levels of studies. If these quantities are compared across autonomous communities, we can find some interesting differences, even between communities with large populations. For example, in the whole VET system there is just under one third more students in Catalonia than in Madrid.

Regarding gender distribution, there is a very important percentage difference in Initial Vocational Qualification Programmes. In the academic year 2011-2012, the percentage of young male students was 69 %, and the percentage of young female students was 31 %. This difference is smaller in intermediate level VET programmes (55.8 % males, 44.2 % females), and leads to similar percentages in advanced level VET programmes (51.2 % males, 48.8% females). The proportion of females is well balanced in advanced level VET programmes, where qualification and exigency levels are higher. On the contrary, there are more males attending courses within Initial Vocational Qualification Programmes. These programmes are aimed to reduce ESL rates, and young men are far more likely to leave school early (Enguita, M., Mena, L., Riviere, J., 2010). The percentage of females that have completed their studies in intermediate level VET programmes is 52.97 %. This percentage is also higher in advanced level VET programmes: 54.16 % (FTFE, 2012). Despite this, the number of males is higher in all education levels.

Regarding age, it should be noted that the average is higher than expected. 48.83 % of students are older than 18 in the intermediate level, while 58.10 % is at least 21 years old in the high level. This is due to the high school repetition rate in Spain. The Adequacy Rate (percentage of students of the exact target age of the course) decreases as students get older—that is, there is an increase as students pass from primary education to secondary education. The worst rates are obtained in secondary education: in 2011-2012, adequacy rate for 10 year olds was 89.1%, decreasing to 61.7% for 15 year olds. This reflects the high repetition rates in Spain, with an average of 36 % (although some places, like the Canary Islands, show a 45 % figure). This leads to an increase of the average age of students at every educational level, especially in VET programmes (OECD, 2012).

Concerning foreign students, 5.18 % of the total of people attending VET programmes come from other countries. This percentage presents considerable variability in the different Autonomous Communities. Madrid and Catalonia show higher percentages (9.10 % and 8.32 %), while other communities with high immigration rates show low figures (e.g. 2.63 % in Andalusia). In the academic year 2012-2013, 31,695 foreign students enrolled in medium level VET programmes, while 18,405 studied high level courses. Undoubtedly the efforts of educational administrations towards social integration are leading to an increase in the number of foreign students (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2013a), but these figures remain evidently low if we consider the high immigration

rates for Spain in the last decade.

New legal regulations in the Spanish educational system

Regarding students' choice, there are a higher proportion of young people opting for the Baccalaureate in Spain, unlike other OECD countries. For this reason, the Spanish Central Government passed the LOMCE in December 2013, as a reform of the General Education Act (BOE, 2013). Among its main key aspects, the LOMCE aims to impulse VET programmes by providing a more flexible access framework for students, as well as some improvements in the relationships of the different sub-systems integrating these studies. To access to the new Basic Level VET programmes students are required to meet the following requirements: be between 15 and 17 years old, have passed the first cycle of Compulsory Secondary Education, be proposed by the teaching staff, and have an authorization by their parents. These students have usually failed previous courses and they do not have possibilities to complete the secondary education, so they cannot access Baccalaureate or Intermediate level VET programmes.

Students wishing to study intermediate level VET programmes are required to have completed the Compulsory Secondary Education or to have obtained a Basic Training Diploma. Those who do not meet these requirements should attend a specific course or pass a test, and they should be at least 17 years of age. Entry requirements for advanced level VET programmes are different: a Baccalaureate or a Technician Diploma. Candidates who do not have any of these qualifications need to pass an entry exam and they must be, at least, 19 years of age. Some specific regulations for these tests have been developed in several Autonomous Communities, such as Castilla-La Mancha (DOCM, 2012). Entry exams to intermediate level VET programmes have helped students who failed their secondary education or abandoned their studies. In fact, this profile characterizes almost 17 % of the candidates who started these studies in the academic course 2011-2012. Entry exams were more successful in advanced level VET programmes with 27 % of candidates gaining access via this method (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2013a).

VET Diplomas can also be obtained through different specific tests. The assessment of these tests is done by modular training and they cover the contents included in the curriculum. In some places (i.e. the Valencian Community), specific regulations have been developed to regulate their sphere of action (DOCV, 2008). In this way, candidates who have passed a modular training course associated with competence units in the National Qualifications Catalogue can retake an exam for the failed subject(s). This via is equally important for reducing ESL in students of between 18 and 24 years of age.

Students who do not fully complete a VET programme obtain an academic record certifying a partial fulfilment of the programme, including a list of the professional modules passed. The certificate is legally valid and, apart from having academic effects, have effects of partial accreditation of the professional competences acquired, if related to the National System of Qualifications and Vocational Training (BOE, 2007a). This is another important measure that prevents exclusion from the system and subsequent increases in ESL rates.

Regarding study plans, the Central Government regulates VET programmes and their corresponding curriculum. It establishes the objectives and modular training courses, and specifies learning results, basic contents, hours, and credit equivalences with university studies (in the case of advanced level VET programmes). Each Autonomous Community adapts the programme to its

socio-economic reality and to its perspectives of economic and social development, e.g. the successful implementation in Cantabria (BOC, 2004).

Regarding training and education of the teaching staff, the qualifications levels are generally very high, as all teachers must hold a B.A. degree, a degree in Engineering or equivalent and a postgraduate in Pedagogy. In line with this, educational centres are classified in three types: public and private centres authorized by the competent educational administration, integrated VET centres, and national reference centres (BOE, 2002).

Integrated VET centres offer initial VET programmes, reintegration into the labour market and other permanent training activities for active workers (BOE, 2005b). These centres present a flexible, wide variety of modules, and they all lead to both VET sub-systems. Apart from the modules of each professional sector, they offer career information and guidance services, as well as assessment systems of the competencies acquired through non-formal training and work experience. To this end, some years ago, the Central Government established a system to recognise professional competences acquired through work experience (BOE, 2009). These centres allow the participation of the most significant social agents in the system and try to fulfil the requirements of production systems, as well as workers' individual needs and their personal expectations of professional promotion.

In the same line, there is network of national reference centres throughout the whole country that carry out innovations and tests in VET programmes, so each centre is specialized in a given professional sector or field (BOE, 2008b). Their high level of specialization makes them reference centres for the whole National System of Qualifications and Vocational Training. These centres usually offer training for active and unemployed workers, entrepreneurs and trainers. However, their fundamental role is to promote research measures and programmes deemed necessary to fulfil the particular needs of every sector (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2013c).

Purposes and structure of Basic level VET programmes

As mentioned earlier, the Spanish Central Government passed the LOMCE law in December 2013, as a reform of the General Education Act (BOE, 2013). One of its most important measures is the creation of Basic level VET programmes, which come to replace Initial Vocational Qualification Programmes. It also seeks to reduce ESL rates, and offer better opportunities of personal and professional development. With this purpose in mind, learning opportunities of basic competences adapted to professional areas are extended, and students receive help to progress while their lifelong learning is encouraged.

National legislation on these issues sets the regulations of 14 Basic Training Diplomas on very different areas: Cooking and Restoration, Carpentry work and Furniture, Agro Gardening, Hairdressing, etc., and includes other professional sectors that require higher degrees of knowledge and training, i.e. Electricity and Electronics, Computer Science and Communication, Car Maintenance or Administration Services.

According to the National Qualifications Catalogue, the professional profile of these Basic level VET programmes includes competence units associated to level 1. In this level, training about basic levels of prevention is included.

The duration is 2,000 hours, and typically require full-time study during two academic years. However, this can be expanded to three if they belong to dual VET programmes (BOE, 2012b). The

maximum period of study is four years.

There are three types of modular training programmes in the Basic VET level. Firstly, there are the modules associated to competence units in the National Qualifications Catalogue. Secondly, the Spanish law system establishes modules associated to common learning blocks, such as one on Communication and Society and another on Applied Sciences. Communication and Society includes subjects such as Spanish Language, a Foreign Language and Social Sciences. Applied Sciences includes Mathematics and Sciences applied to the personal context and learning in a professional field. Both refer to the curriculum used in Spanish Compulsory Secondary Education (BOE, 2013).

The time load of both modules is between 35 % and 40 % of the total, including a weekly tutorial session of one hour. Due to some special characteristics, some groups are allowed to reduce this percentage to a minimum of 22 %.

Thirdly, there is an on-the-job training module that requires that students have a previous knowledge of the risks of the professional sector they will be working in, and how to prevent them. As an exception, Spanish regulations allow educational administrations to carry out this teaching in educational centres or public institutions. The minimum duration is 12 % out of the total of the programme.

Apart from these modules, career guidance and transversal contents like environmental respect or the promotion of physical activity and a healthy diet are also taught within the curriculum. Besides this, Spanish administration authorities establish that students should get a wider knowledge on important values for the society, such as gender equality and prevention of domestic violence.

As a norm, it has been established that the number of teachers per group should be as reduced as possible. To this purpose, teachers have to adopt a comprehensive methodology with measures of attention to diversity, and they should meet educational needs of students, especially those related to linguistic competences included in the module on Communication and Society. Besides, mentors of each group should propose an annual tutorial action plan, to be carried out in groups of no more than 30 students (BOE, 2014).

Students wishing to access these programmes should be between fifteen and seventeen years of age, and they need to have passed the first cycle or the second course of Compulsory Secondary Education.

Although the basic training diploma allows starting intermediate level VET programmes, if a student wants to obtain the diploma in secondary education, he or she will have to pass the specific test established to that effect. By the same token, both diplomas provide similar work opportunities of access to public and private posts.

People older than 22 with accreditation of all competence units from a basic training diploma—certified by occupational certificates (level 1) or by other assessment procedures or accreditation of competencies— can obtain the basic training diploma of the corresponding area of specialization. Educational administrations will also be able to offer these programmes to people who are older than 17 years of age and do not hold a VET Diploma. This action promotes employability of this collective.

Can Basic level VET programmes reduce ESL risks?

Basic level VET programmes were created to reduce ESL risks (BOE, 2013). But... what is this phenomenon about?

According to Enguita et al. (2010), ESL is defined as the situation of those students aged between 18 and 24 who have not completed secondary school. It also refers to those students who finish these courses but do not continue in Baccalaureate or in Intermediate Level VET programmes.

The Council of the European Union adopted in 2009 the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (Official Journal of the European Union, 2009). Four common strategic objectives to fulfil professional, social and personal development of EU citizens were established within this framework. Strategic objective number 3 supports the implementation of policies to reduce ESL percentages to less than 10 % before ending 2020. In the case of Spain, UE establishes a percentage of 15 % for 2020.

According to the Statistical Office of the EU, the ESL rate in Spain in 2013 was 23.4 %, while the European ESL rate was 11.9 % (Eurostat, 2014). EU percentage has decreased 0.5 % per year since 2000 (17.6 %). In Spain, however, percentages show increasing and decreasing variations, with 29.1 % at the beginning of 2000 and its maximum peak (32 %) in 2004. Compared to the 28 EU countries, Spain shows the highest ESL rate, more than Malta and Portugal. Eighteen out of the twenty-eight countries of the EU do not exceed a percentage of 10 % in the ESL rate. Croatia, Slovenia, Poland and the Czech Republic are the countries with less early school leavers, with percentages under 6 %.

According to Spanish educational authorities, there are great differences in ESL rates among the different regions of the country. In this context, Andalusia and Extremadura present higher percentages (28.8 % and 32.2 %) than the Basque Country (11.5 %), Navarra (13.3 %) and Cantabria (14 %). Figures registered in some of these regions are even lower than UE average.

But... what are the causes of early school leaving?

To answer this question, in the following we provide an overview on the conclusions of different researches on the topic. For Rumberger & Thomas (2000), higher ESL risks are found in students of lower classes or who come from broken families. According to their study, resources play a crucial role on reducing school dropouts. Besides, they show that teaching staff qualifications is the most influential variable on ESL rates, amongst others like the student–teacher ratio and income.

In exchange, Casquero & Navarro (2010) consider that personal family characteristics and the socioeconomic level of the surrounding environment are fundamental factors for ESL. In their study, it is shown that the father's absence, nationality of the father, educational level, size of the family or work situation are decisive risk factors. Enguita et al (2010) quote Gil-Verona (2003) in their study *School Failure and Dropouts in Spain* to point out that females show less challenging behaviour and mature faster than males, so their ESL rate is lower. There are four risk factors for ESL in males: social origin, gender, and belonging to minority communities and/or broken families. Work class students, males, non-natives (that is to say, with immigrant parents) or with single or lone parents present a higher risk of school dropout.

Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir (2009) have focused their research on the influence of parental styles on student dropout risks. For them, factors like family participation in the school community,

academic achievements and students' perception on parental styles are fundamental. Conclusions drawn from this study point out that students who believe that their parents tend to a democratic education style (that is, they generate feelings of acceptance and supervision to their children), have more possibilities to complete post-compulsory education. They agree on the fact that the student's academic level is closely linked to parental styles, so this has a stronger association to school leaving than the implication of parents. In spite of this, they outline the importance of the family in students' academic achievements, as a source of motivation. In this line, Martínez & Álvarez (2005) suggest the need of a close collaboration between families and schools. For these authors, families are a good source of information about students' lives and experiences and they can help schools to offer better educational responses. By collaboration or implication between families and schools, we refer to the frequency by which they get into contact by formal or informal means, as well as the support of families in students' work, or their participation in the activities organized by Students' Mothers and Fathers Associations (Opara, 2003).

In a research on the relationship of ESL and students' implication in schools, Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani (2009) consider three different perspectives: behavioural, affective and cognitive. These researchers are drawn to the conclusion that behavioural factors (i.e. truancy, lack of respect and disobedience) have the strongest influence on school leaving. This behaviour is, in turn, influenced by affective and cognitive components. Negative emotional states, lack of interest in school and lack of motivation will finally lead to a bad behaviour, and, consequently, to possible dropouts. Bask & Salmela-Aro (2012) conducted a study on the so-called school burnout. Their results show that students showing attitudes of rejection to school have more possibilities of becoming early school-leavers. In the same vein, Fall & Roberts (2012) state that students' academic and behavioural commitment plus academic achievements are associated to less probabilities of ESL.

Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernández (1989) identify school and social participation with a feeling of belonging to these communities. Students who do not develop social links with their partners and school authorities present higher risks of ESL.

Finally, Traag & Van der Velden (2011) consider that students' personal characteristics, family resources and the educational environment are relevant for school dropout. For them, students' personal characteristics include cognitive skills, motivation, gender, ability to participate, and level of identification with the school. Family resources are: economic capital, parents' academic level, and cultural capital and family relationships (parents-sons and daughters or among brothers/sisters). Educational environment refers to ethnic heterogeneity and schools location, whether they are on the city or in the countryside. Their more relevant results show that males have the double of possibilities of leaving school early, and that the more students feel motivated and integrated in schools, the minor is the risk of ESL. With regards to family resources, children from low-income families with parents of low educational and cultural levels and bad relationships are the most likely to leave school early (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011).

On the other hand, after an analysis of the implication of families in schools, disciplinary measures, and problems of identity and economic status, Opara (2003) concluded that students attending urban schools have more probabilities of abandoning their studies. This is because students in suburban areas tend to make greater efforts to overcome inequalities and have better expectations for the future.

Studies by the Valencian Institute of Economic Research (Instituto Valenciano de Investigaciones Económicas, 2013), links ESL to students' personal characteristics, educational and economic level of the families, academic achievements and educational environment. This report shows the effects of environment's work demands on ESL: in areas where basic training is required, there are higher probabilities of school dropouts. The same idea appears in Muñoz, Antón, Braña & Fernández (2009) in a research about the demand of low qualified workers and its influence on students' decisions.

Finally, we can conclude that ESL has serious social consequences, i.e. low employability, precarious work, less economic income, social adaptation problems, unhealthy lifestyles, and high levels of social exclusion (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Brock, 2001; Traag & Van der Velden, 2013). In fact, according to the most recent UE data, poverty and social exclusion risks in Spain is 22.2 % out of the total population, one of the highest ones in Europe, only surpassed by Greece (23.1 %) and Romania (22.6 %) (Eurostat, 2014). Regarding social exclusion, it should be noted that there are important differences within regions: Andalusia (38.6 %) and the Canary Islands (38.2 %) triple the rate obtained in the Chartered Community of Navarre (13.1 %). These are, precisely, the areas where ESL rates are higher. The percentage of population at the risk of poverty differs according to educational level of individuals. The higher the level of qualification, the lower the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Conclusion

As we said above, Basic level VET programmes were created to reduce ESL risks (BOE, 2013) and a right implementation of these programmes can be an effective tool against ESL.

So, we can confirm that teaching staff qualifications are decisive for a reduction of ESL (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Thus, a solid training in didactics and methodology should be provided to teachers in Basic level VET programmes. We cannot forget that students in these programmes have previously failed their studies; and they are not likely to complete Compulsory Secondary Education successfully (an essential requirement to continue further education). Because of the difficult profile of these students, teachers should do their best to make them feel motivated and interested, so they decide to continue an intermediate level VET programme. Motivation is a key tool and its success depend on teachers' work and commitment. Obviously, lack of interest and motivation eventually leads to bad behaviour and consequent school dropouts (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009).

To this purpose, teachers should know students very well and have an aptitude of proximity. They should adjust their expectations to the reality of the classroom. If we can get our students aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, they will be able to set their own objectives. Besides, teachers should praise them when these objectives are fulfilled. A very useful technique consists of publishing their theoretical and practical assignments. This strategy increases their motivation and self-esteem.

If we can also make them getting involved in the norms and workings of the classroom, an environment of respect can be created. This is ideal for teamwork and increases motivation. Organizing visits to professionally-related environments is also an important measure. The main aim of this activity is to create a learning environment where proximity and good-quality relationships between teachers and students prevent school dropouts (Wehlage et al., 1989).

We believe that the requirements for accessing these programmes (being proposed by the teaching staff and an authorization of the parents) are a positive aspect to take into account. In this way, we prevent that those students with abilities, competences and potential to complete higher stages of education decide to enrol on basic VET level programmes on their own.

Regulations on Basic VET programmes establish measures for attention to diversity to meet

educational needs. These measures are essential, because of the special features of the students attending these programmes: low cognitive, social emotional and moral competencies, and lack of motivation. It is remarkable that these regulations take into account the need of educating in values such as environmental respect and gender equality, with an especial emphasis on domestic violence prevention. In this sense, some education and social awareness programmes have been developed in Spain recently.

Law requirements on promotion of physical activity are also a positive aspect. Physical activities can be an important motivation tool for students, and it would be necessary to include them on the curriculum. In fact, the European Union shares this objective in the new initiative ERASMUS + The EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport 2014-2020, where “Sport” is considered as one of the priority objectives that promotes social inclusion (Official Journal of the European Union, 2013).

The fact that the number of teachers per group should be as reduced as possible is also of great value. This allows teachers to be more aware of students’ needs and helps them to create a collaborative environment where all decisions are reached by consensus. Based on this, teaching methods should be of a comprehensive nature. However, the maximum of students per class (30) established by the Spanish Government do not present any advantage. Economic cutbacks in the country are clearly producing an increase of the student-teacher ratio in all educational levels, and this limits the possibilities of success of VET programmes. We cannot forget that these studies seek to reduce ESL risks by ensuring that students remain within the education system. The key is in how each Autonomous Community apply the Central Government Royal Decree (BOE, 2014), since it is their sole responsibility. The Government sets a maximum –so autonomous governments with larger education budgets would probably be able to establish a lower ratio. As a consequence of this, regional differences could be on increase.

The role of mentors in basic level VET programmes is essential, because they must dynamize each group’s work and plan the relevant tutorial action programme. Given the profile of these students, mentors should take the most of each weekly tutorial session to help them improve their social skills and solve communal living problems within the group, or teacher-related. Due to these circumstances, schools should select experienced teachers, with good pedagogic competences. Besides, an aptitude of proximity in teachers is completely essential. We think that social educators, a figure which is not taken into account in current regulations, are extremely important because they could help mentors and the rest of teaching staff. Social educators are qualified to work in the development of students’ social emotional and moral competences, personal development and resilience. Their role would be to act as a link between students, families and schools. We propose social educators for this role because people working in high schools Guidance Departments deal with huge workload, so it is difficult for them to fulfil accurately the educational needs of all students.

Another basic factor is promoting work guidance as established by current regulations, since this has a remarkable influence on work expectations and students’ motivation. To this purpose, mentors should be supported by Guidance Departments, because it is their duty to make students aware of possible job opportunities, so they could choose an intermediate level VET programme adapted to their interests.

Since parental styles influence ESL risks (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2009), we believe that parental educational programmes are needed to work with parents whose sons are on risk of

abandoning Basic VET studies. The idea is to help parents to adopt a democratic education style, with open-mindedness and supervision. It is also necessary to work in family relationships (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011), because lack of harmony can cause school dropouts. To this purpose, communication should be improved to face conflictive situations in family relationships, and we must offer tools to avoid violent behaviour. It has been proved that parental educational programmes can produce positive results in short periods of time, and influence students' general behaviour and the relationship between families and schools. This improves the influence on family background on the academic performance of students, which is a source of motivation to continue studying (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2009). Schools where these programmes are held must remain open to family environments, and they should ease collaboration among all the parts concerned. Solutions proposed by schools can be enriched if families provide relevant information about experience and life of students.

Male students present higher ESL rates than female students (27,0 % vs 19.9 %), (Eurostat, 2014). These data are preceded by certain research (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011), that shows that young male students have more possibilities of leaving school early than young female students. For this reason, attention should be paid to this collective.

Besides, we should pay attention to urban institutions offering these studies, as there are more ESL possibilities in these places than in non-urban areas (Opara, 2003). In this sense, a partial solution would be to give more economic and human resources to urban schools, particularly to those that present higher ESL risks, families with low income and low education and cultural levels (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011).

Work demand in Spain had a significant impact on school dropouts (Instituto Valenciano de Investigaciones Económicas, 2013; Muñoz et al., 2009), because ESL rates increased in places where basic training and low-qualified workers were required to work. This happened mainly in the building sector, especially in those places where the real estate boom exploded —one of the causes of today's economic crisis in Spain. Although current regulations allow minors to work from the age of 16 (with an authorisation by the parents), it becomes essential to increase the legal age to enter the workforce. Besides, companies should require more qualified workers. In this way, young people would need a minimum professional qualification for being successfully incorporated in the economic-production system.

Through an analysis of the inner organisation of Basic level VET study plans, we have found out that, according to current regulations, students can repeat courses twice for a total of two years; i.e. they can study these programmes for a maximum of four years. Spanish education system is rigid and does not offer other options. In fact, as we have previously commented, repetition rates are extremely high in this country. This requires the search for alternatives to repetition.

Through a deep research on study plans, it has been proved that there is an excellent modular structure, i.e. modules associated to competence units in the National Qualifications Catalogue, and others associated to common learning blocks. It is good that such contents are taught by a single teacher in both the Communication and Society and Applied Sciences modules. Difficulties may arise because of the methods used, given the fact that the Royal Decree establishes that contents of each learning block should follow the Compulsory Secondary Education model (BOE, 2014). However, if patterns of contents and methodological strategies of secondary education is repeated, failure is guaranteed. This is why selecting teachers according to their qualification turns out to be essential in

the success of the programme (Rumemberg & Thomas, 2000). In any case, time load of both modules is between 35 % and 40 % of the total. We value positively the flexibility of regulations, since Autonomous Communities are allowed to reduce this percentage to a minimum of 22 % of the total; and the only condition is that the acquisition of learning results should always be achieved. This is a key element, because some students groups are characterized by conflicting aptitudes in the classroom. These students feel more motivated by practical activities rather than by theoretical sessions. Regulations are aimed to make sure that the different educational administrations guarantee measures of attention to diversity. These measures allow schools to organize a learning system in accordance to students' characteristics, by paying special attention to the acquisition of linguistic competences, especially of students with difficulties. This is very important if we take into account the high rate of immigrant students in Spain. But it is also an important step towards school autonomy, given the reduced possibilities that schools usually have for these matters. In this way, in considering students' characteristics, schools can meet their specific needs.

Eventually, ESL rates are so high in the Spanish society that current regulations allow educational administrations to offer these programmes to unqualified students older than 17. It is clear that adopting these measures can help to make young people return to the educational system, and is also of great help for integrating them again in our society.

If we analyse serious consequences of ESL —low employability, precarious work, less economic income, social adaptation problems, unhealthy lifestyles, and high levels of social exclusion (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Brock, 2011, Traag & Van der Velden, 2013)—, we get to the conclusion that the Spanish society must take efficient measures quickly to reduce ESL rates. A right implementation of Basic level VET programmes can be an effective tool against ESL. If it was not like that, our society's future would be in question. The more trained the population is, the less are the chances of poverty and social exclusion. In this context, and according to poverty figures and ESL rates in Spain, we conclude that Basic level VET programmes are of fundamental importance to development in Spain. Allocation of resources to these programmes could be completely justified from an economic perspective. This is a reality, because if ESL rates are reduced, then poverty rates and demand of social services decrease. As a consequence, overall economic cost for our society can be minor, and work productivity, and even tax income, can increase.

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Basic level VET programmes: a tool against the risk of Early School Leaving in Spain

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