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Training and Employment for Young People with Low Levels of Education: Lessons from Action-Research and Participatory Evaluation

Francesca Salvà, Agnès Melià, Joan Nadal, Carolina Lomas

UNIVERSITAT ILLES BALEARS, Spain

Presenting Author: **Salvà, Francesca**

The study presented is part of a co-evaluation project between a social enterprise centre located in the city of Palma (Balearic Islands, Spain) that specialises in training and job placement for young people with low educational levels (Jovent Occupational Training Centre) and the University of the Balearic Islands' "Education and Citizenship" research group.

Spain is one of the EU countries with the worst indicators in the fields of education, training and jobs for young people. And within Spain, the Balearic Islands is one of the lowest-ranking regions in terms of education and training, at a historic time in which post-compulsory secondary education is considered the minimum level for successful entry into the job market and the basis for further participation in continuing education (OCDE 2005, 2010). The European Union considers reducing early school leaving rates a priority among its economic and social development policies (Commission of the European Communities, 2002, European Commission, 2011). Spain has an early dropout rate of 31.9% and the rate in the Balearics is 43.2%, compared with 14.9% for the EU as a whole (Basque Institute for Educational Research and Evaluation, 2010).

Within the group of early school dropouts, those who have not earned the diploma corresponding to the first stage of secondary education (ISCED 2) are the most disadvantaged. The difficulties these young people encounter in going back to school (Fernández Enguita, Mena, Riviere, 2010, Garcia, Casal, Merino, Sanchez, en prensa) and the relationship between educational and social exclusion have been clearly documented (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2000, Silver, Miller, 2003; Albert, Davia, 2011).

The integral itinerary of guidance, training and job placement carried out by CFO Jovent addresses this population, particularly young people from 16 to 25 years of age who have not obtained a first-stage secondary school diploma and present various vulnerabilities.

The study presented here represents a moment of maturity in joint work (begun in 1999) and attempts to answer the following questions: Why do young people who have dropped out of the education system voluntarily participate in the itinerary? Why do some of them complete the full itinerary and why do others leave? What are their personal and professional pathways like after leaving the itinerary? What strategies and actions could be undertaken to improve the participation of women and the immigrant population? The answers to these questions would improve the itinerary's adjustment to young people's needs and create and formalise useful and transferable skills to improve socio-educational work and public policies.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

This is an evaluative study within an action-research framework based on the young participants' life stories. The information gathered in this way was triangulated for each subject with information from the centre's database and an in-depth interview with a professional of reference from the centre.

The real sample of informants encompassed fifteen young people - thirteen males and two females - between 19 and 22 years of age on the whole, with a wide diversity of geographical origins. Ten of them completed the itinerary and five dropped out.

The interview guide encompassed several points in time (before undertaking the itinerary, during the itinerary, after completing the itinerary) and dimensions in the young people's lives (family and social environment, education and training, work, self-concept and expectations).

The interviews were conducted between June and October 2009. Guidelines typical of the analysis of content of the biographical interviews were followed to analyse their contents (Bertaux, 1997, Desmarais, 2009).

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

The following figure prominently among the main research results:

- Improved understanding of the reasons for participating in the itinerary and the relationship between these reasons and the results obtained, as well as of the reasons leading to completing or dropping out of the itinerary.
- Clear evidence of the impact of implementing the itinerary on the young people's career paths taken as a whole.
- A preliminary proposal for evaluation indicators that focus on personal, professional and social development.
- Proposals to improve the itinerary, create specific programmes and devices and galvanise a network of services and projects.

The challenge facing us now is to transfer these results to education, training and job policies for young people. This is essential in a context in which bureaucratic-administrative requirements sheltering behind technocratic discourses that prioritise supposedly neutral efficiencies and efficacies increasingly hamper the socio-educational discourses and practices that constitute real opportunities for young people without qualifications.

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