

**Gender and educational decisions in basic vocational training:
discussions and experiences in Spain**

Abstract

Basic vocational training (BVT) represents a new opportunity within the Spanish education system to reduce the school drop-out rate and ease the transition into the workplace. However, this educational route is highly male-dominated and presents a high degree of segregation by gender and pathways. It was therefore necessary to carry out a gender-based analysis and investigate the processes, options and reasons behind students' decisions to opt for a particular professional category. To achieve this, we carried out 35 in-depth interviews at educational centres that teach BVT in the Valencian Community, Spain. Our main findings were that BVT is not only highly male-dominated, but that the female-dominated branches are few and far between, are still subject to strong stereotypes, enjoy less prestige and have fewer job prospects. Therefore, BVT and its impacts are far from gender neutral. In addition, this negatively influences future training and employment options and choices, especially for females, which obviously has a direct impact on their professional careers and life courses.

Keywords: Vocational training; Basic vocational training; Gender; Educational choice

Introduction

In the 2018-2019 academic year, a total of 73,810 young people were enrolled in basic vocational training (BVT) in Spain¹. This figure contrasts with the nearly one million (923,371) students who were in their final year of compulsory secondary education (hereinafter, ESO, from its Spanish initials)².

BVT is a compulsory and free educational stage, with a clear orientation towards the labor market. BTV lasts two years, offers applied training aimed at the labor market, and allows obtaining a certification with academic and professional validity. To access a BTV one must be between 15 and 17 years old, have completed the first cycle of compulsory secondary education -or the 2nd year- and be proposed by the teaching and guidance team.

This new educational stage replaced initial professional qualification programmes³ in the Spanish education system in the 2014-2015 academic year and pursued the same objective: to allow the education centre's coordination team to identify students at risk of disengagement from the education system and offer them an alternative route to prevent them from leaving school early.

This formed part of the reform package introduced under the Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality, so-called LOMCE in Spanish. This education law, pushed through by the conservative government of the Popular Party in 2013, sought to

¹Unless stated otherwise, the data presented here come from the Statistics on Non-University Education provided by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. Retrieved from <https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/servicios-al-ciudadano/estadisticas/no-universitaria.html> (consulted in September 2020).

² Compulsory secondary education in the Spanish educational system reaches up to 16 years of age. As for the post-compulsory stage, it is divided into two lines: Vocational Training with middle and higher cycles, and Baccalaureate aimed at accessing university studies. BTV, although related to Vocational Training, is situated in the compulsory educational stage.

³. The Initial Professional Qualification Programs (PCPI) were the main resource included in the LOE (Organic Law 2/2006, of May 3, on Education), to avoid school dropouts and consisted of training in basic and professional skills but also allowed Obtain the ESO certificate (secondary school) by taking voluntary modules.

provide a solution to the high level of early school leaving in Spain. In fact, the early dropout rate in 2013 was 23.6%, a figure that had fallen from the 2008 rate of 31.7%, most likely due to the effects of the Great Recession. In 2018, the dropout rate stood at 17.9%.

This educational policy has attracted a great deal of criticism from both the academic world and the educational community, since it represents a step backwards with respect to the inclusive objectives established by the former model. For many authors this facilitates the reproduction of social inequality through education.

In the specific case of the BTV as a mechanism to combat early school leaving, we can focus its criticisms on three key aspects, following Tarabini and Montes (2015): the equating of school success to academic performance, the lack of mechanisms to prevent dropout in earlier educational cycles, and the inclusion of premature itineraries that do not diminish the unequal leaving conditions. By steering younger students towards a secondary pathway while restricting their future career prospects (Bonal, Tarabini, and Verger 2015), and once again conflating vocational training with early school leaving (Merino 2012). Furthermore, those continue to be mechanisms of “externalization of school failure” (Rujas, 2020: 547), since they identify the students with the worst performance and attitude towards studying and place them on different itineraries (and stigmatized) while still in the compulsory education stage.

However, few gender-based analyses of this educational route have been carried out, despite the stark figures. During the 2018-2019 academic year, 71% of the students enrolled in BVT were male, a significantly higher percentage than those enrolled in the middle and upper levels of vocational training (hereinafter, FP), with 57.9%⁴ and 54.58%,

⁴ Here we refer to data on ordinary, face-to-face teaching.

respectively, and the percentage of males in ESO, with 50.3%. Indeed, in the research that gave rise to this article⁵, we sought to focus on this difference and to identify the reasons why fewer females than males make use of this safety net against early school leaving and, above all, the reasons why the few females who do opt for this route tend to converge on just a handful of professional categories.

Gender is enmeshed in and permeates our everyday lives, and plays a fundamental role in shaping our life course. Educational choices represent one of the key turning points in life. Many questions remained unanswered regarding the role played by gender in these decisions.

More specifically, little is known about the pathways that have recently emerged, such as BVT, which has introduced two new factors that, in our opinion, justify this analysis. First, access to this route is driven directly by the education centre itself, since it is the teaching team's responsibility to propose to parents or legal guardians that their child undertake BVT⁶; this introduces a selective mechanism into a supposedly comprehensive training pathway (Rujas 2017). Second, in its pursuit to provide practical and professional training, this measure has become a new vocational training route and therefore requires that students choose a specific professional category from those offered within the Spanish education system, which can serve to pigeonhole students into a certain sector and can therefore have a huge impact on their future living conditions.

Thus, analysing BVT from a gender perspective requires us to focus on the processes underlying the high degree of male domination in this system and the clear gender asymmetry that characterizes the distribution of students (and teaching staff) (Obiol et al. 2020) and that reinforces the asymmetry that is also encountered in certain sectors of the

⁵ Not shown to be Anonymous.

⁶ Royal Decree 127/2014 of 28 February, Official State Bulletin No. 55 of 5 March 2014.

labour market. This aspect is key to gaining a better understanding of the role played by gender in educational disengagement processes (Francis, 1999; Jackson 2006; Jackson and Tinkler 2007) and in vocational training pathways (Niemeyer and Colley 2015; Merino 2020).

The objective of our study was to achieve a more in-depth understanding, by listening to those involved, of the processes underlying students' decisions to undertake BVT and, at the same time, to opt for a particular professional category, by focusing on gender and its performative capacity as a fundamental factor in the construction of these processes.

The research carried out involved a methodological triangulation process that combined quantitative and qualitative research techniques; however, the approach was markedly qualitative in nature and incorporated a gender perspective. We sought to better understand the route taken by young people towards BVT as a measure designed to keep students in the education system in cases where they are at risk of dropping out. At the same time, we wanted the different social agents involved (teachers, young people and families) to tell us about their experiences and views of this pathway, in addition to their reasons for choosing a specific speciality.

Although this article includes some useful data for context, it focuses primarily on the analysis of qualitative interviews carried out with BVT students as part of a project undertaken at centres in the Valencian Community, one of the Spanish regions with the highest number of centres that offer BVT⁷. It is important to note that the Spanish education system is managed by the regional governments, and this factor plays a decisive

⁷ In the 2018-2019 academic year, 15.65% of the students enrolled in BVT in Spain were located in the Valencian Community and 16.53% of the centres that taught BVT were located in this region. These figures are surpassed only by Andalusia.

role in how education laws are applied and in how regions respond to these measures in accordance with the territorial reality.

Our research question is: did gender and its performative nature lead young people to make educational choices that could condition their career path? It is important to keep in mind that BVT is presented as a mechanism to prevent early school leaving, but we cannot overlook the role it plays in the different institutional arrangements for classifying and pigeonholing young people (Rujas 2017) who will most likely be transferred to the job market. In fact, according to Bernard and Molpeceres (2006, 167), BVT can be understood as a way of “steering a population group towards low-skilled, highly precarious jobs, thereby moulding them to adapt to the management and production practices and logic of flexible capitalism in the secondary market”.

This work is divided into six sections. Firstly, by way of reflection, we present the theoretical framework underlying the research and, secondly, we outline the methodological strategies used, before going on to analyse the results and their respective discussion. Lastly, we present the conclusions and bibliography.

Agency, structure and gender in vocational training decision-making

Despite the fact that common sense clearly plays a role in reinforcing agency in the construction of individuals' educational (and professional) trajectories, and that this explanation is underpinned by the extension and deepening of the individualization process (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2003), it is difficult to deny the role played by social structures in these trajectories and the need to analyse the complex interplay between individual, social and institutional factors (Gillies 2005; Niemeyer and Colley 2015; Obiol-Francés 2017; Julià, 2018; Beckmann, 2021).

It was useful to apply Bourdieu's analysis framework (1998) to our study, especially with respect to the notion of limits imposed by the material conditions of existence and choices made in accordance with structural pressures and unequally distributed knowledge. In terms of educational decision-making, class appears as a fundamental analysis variable in most research papers; however, we considered it necessary to examine this process in light of the capacity of gender to shape these same decisions.

Research on why women and men choose educational and professional trajectories differently has long shown that gender segregation in education has nothing to do with ability, skill or knowledge, but rather that the causes lie in structural factors. In addition, the generalization of the discourse of educational success of women has led to a masking of the many inequalities that still exist and that a more focused look at the detail allows us to discover, as previous research has shown in the case of the Valencian educational system (Villar and Obiol, 2021). In fact, there are many voices, especially in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, that vindicate research from a gender perspective. This debate, especially political and in the media, focuses on the concern for the worst academic performance of boys, even though it does not mean a decrease in their pre-eminence in the educational or labour system, nor in the social imaginary (Francis, 1999; Jackson, 2006; Reay, 2001, Archer et al., 2020). In the specific case of Vocational Training, although studies remain in short supply, those that do exist point to structural factors and stereotypes (Mariño and Rial 2019; Obiol-Francés et al. 2020; Vidal and Merino 2020; Villar-Aguilés and Obiol-Francés 2020) that limit women's educational and employment options and, therefore, give rise to severe inequalities over time.

Gender stereotypes form part of our socialization and are replicated among students, teachers, families, the media and public institutions. They are perpetuated and feed back

into the educational and professional segregation that already exists, generating high individual and collective costs (Sáinz 2011; Sáinz, Palmen y García-Cuesta 2012; Vázquez-Cupeiro 2015; Casado Martínez, Meneses Naranjo y Sancho Vinuesa 2016; Palencia-Esteban y del Río, 2020). Thus, preferences and even a significant share of the occupational training options and careers guidance for girls continue to be based on the belief that women are emotional, empathetic, intuitive, dependent and passive and that they opt for female-dominated career paths such as those related to personal care, childcare, domestic work, patient care and administrative tasks.

Although explicit gender discrimination is not as widespread as it used to be, the current vocational training system still seems to suffer from gender blindness, which makes it difficult to bring about major changes (Fernández and Ibáñez 2018). Thus, neither the decision to undertake vocational training nor the choice of professional category is as free as one might think or as gender neutral, and this feeds back into the structural inequalities that exist in the labour world.

As highlighted in other international studies specifically concerning vocational training (Evans 2006), women and men choose gender-typical occupations because of social expectations or social norms and, as a result, develop or are trained in gender-typical competences. This is intensified by and within gender-typical occupations, and gender segregation at work is thus reconstructed, since occupational tasks and cultures influence the way in which competences are recognized and expressed. However, we should not take this gender socialization in a unidirectional and uncritical way since there are complex resistances, that can even be combined with some acceptances of the traditional roles according to moments, areas or situations (Anyon 1984, Brockman, 2021).

1
2
3
4 In spite of those resistances, feminist researchers and official employment data have been
5 alerting us for decades to the deep gender inequalities that are created and perpetuated in
6 the labour market (Torns and Recio 2012; Burchell et al. 2014; González, Vergés and,
7 Martínez 2017). Occupational segregation by gender therefore persists and, as a result,
8 men continue to dominate more formal professions and sectors that are better paid and
9 enjoy greater social recognition, power and prospects, such as technology-related sectors
10 (Barberà, Candela, and Ramos 2008; Vergés-Bosch 2012; Castaño and Webster 2014;
11 González, Vergés and, Martínez 2017; Archer et al., 2020).

22 By contrast, women are still overrepresented in care-related jobs. Such jobs have poorer
23 working conditions, rights, pay, prestige and opportunities for social mobility and future
24 development (Ibáñez 2008; Torns and Recio 2012; Durán 2018). Thus, there is still a
25 profound horizontal and vertical gender division in the labour market. The most female-
26 dominated sectors consist of household-related activities performed by domestic workers
27 and producers of goods and services for personal use, health and social service activities,
28 education and other welfare-related services. In addition, women's employment options
29 are more highly concentrated in this type of work and women are therefore excluded from
30 a greater number of potential jobs (Cáceres et al. 2004; Torns and Recio 2012).

43 Moreover, although a great deal remains to be understood, sex and gender socialization
44 greatly influences the occupational positions of women and men (Polavieja and Platt
45 2010; Platt and Polavieja 2016), and there is evidence of gender stereotypes that continue
46 to permeate the labour market given the difficulties faced by young people to break them
47 down, as well as a lack of adequate measures to encourage this shift, especially in the
48 case of more basic training pathways such as BVT (Beck, Fuller and Unwin 2006; Obiol-
49 Francés et al. 2020).

Methodological strategies

Our goal of gaining a better understanding of the role played by gender in young people's decisions to undertake BVT and to choose a specific professional category called for a qualitative methodology. We wanted the different social agents involved in the construction of these decisions (teachers, young people and families) to tell us their views of this route, in addition to their reasons for choosing a specific speciality.

On the whole, the field work consisted of processing quantitative information (from secondary sources and relating to the centres' training programmes) and conducting group interviews with the management team, tutors, counsellors and equality coordinators, in-depth interviews with parents of BVT students, group interviews with students in their second year of ESO and, as the core element, 35 in-depth interviews with students undertaking BVT.

In addition, once the research was complete, we carried out a number of coeducational workshops in most of the centres under study with the dual purpose of promoting good practices in terms of gender equality (Vergés-Bosch, Freire, and Obiol-Francés 2019) and obtaining more information on decision-making processes concerning training pathways and on the role of gender in their attitudes and behaviour.

In this article, we focus specifically on analysing the in-depth interviews carried out with the young people studying BVT in five of the seven Valencian educational centres to which we had access. Access to the centres was facilitated by the General Directorate of Vocational Training and Special Education of the Valencian Ministry of Education, Research, Culture and Sports⁸, trade unions and personal contacts.

⁸ The administration responsible for education in the Valencian Community.

From this sample of five education centres, a total of 35 interviews were carried out with students undertaking BVT (21 boys and 14 girls), the results of which formed the basis of this article. The interviews were conducted between December 2018 and February 2019. The tutors provided us with access to the students, thereby allowing us to present our research to the young people. Those who wished to participate in the study had to return a consent form, signed by a parent or guardian, since virtually all participants were minors. The interviews were carried out in the education centre itself, in a room other than the students' usual classroom, during school hours (generally during tutoring hours). The script consisted of six main sections: degree of satisfaction with BVT, description of the journey that had led them to undertake BVT, reasons why they had chosen the professional category they were studying, various aspects of their daily lives (relationships with family and friends, hobbies, etc.) and future career plans, in addition to a section on sociodemographic variables as controls. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using the MAXQDA software program based on the identification of meaning codes. In the following sections, we present the results obtained through our research.

A gender-asymmetric training pathway

BVT is a clearly male-dominated educational route. In the 2018-2019 academic year, 70.4% of BVT students at Valencian schools were boys, a figure very much in keeping with the Spanish average (70.7%). Girls, on the other hand, followed a more academic path than boys. The gross ESO completion rate in the Valencian Community was 81% in girls and 67.5% in boys, a difference of more than 13 percentage points⁹. This difference

⁹ The gross completion rate was calculated from the population that had the theoretical age to complete the indicated educational level. Data referring to the 2017-2018 academic year. Source: Ministerio de

was also detected among ESO graduates at schools for adults, who presented a completion rate of 5.2% for women and 4.5% for men.

With respect to the *Bachillerato* (the final two years of secondary education), the gender gap was even wider, with a rate of 59.2% for girls and 43% for boys; incidentally, both these figures were lower than the Spanish average of 63.4% and 48%, respectively. However, the gap turned in favour of boys when we focused on the same indicator in the case of BVT: 8.5% of boys compared to 4.1% of girls in Valencian centres during the 2017-2018 academic year. These indicators were higher in the case of Valencia than the average for Spain as a whole, which stood at 5.5% for boys and 2.5% for girls. In short, the data indicate that boys tend to take a less academic path than girls. Furthermore, given that BVT represents a vocational route, students are required to choose a professional category much earlier than those who follow a more academic path.

We also observed a marked gender difference in young people's choice of professional category. If one considers that a balanced male-female division in professional categories lies between 40% and 60%, the definition used by the European Union in the case of occupations (Hardy et al. 2015), the available data indicate that Personal Image, with 77.9% of the total number of students enrolled being female, and Textiles, Clothing and Leather, with 71.31% of the total being female, were the only female-dominated categories. In addition, Sales and Marketing (51.4%), Administration and Management (49.6%) and Graphic Arts (47.3%) were categories that could be considered balanced in terms of the gender of students.

The figures clearly indicate that all other professional categories offered as part of BVT were male-dominated, with Maritime and Fishing (0%), Transport and Vehicle

Maintenance (1.9%) and Mechanical Manufacturing (2.6%) representing the most extreme cases. That said, some nuances were observed within the different pathways offered as part of certain professional categories; for example, within Hospitality and Catering, in which 34.1% of students were female, those who enrolled in Bakery and Pastry-Making were 50% female, while in the other two programmes included in this professional category (Accommodation and Laundry, and Cooking and Catering), around a third of the students were female (37.4% and 33.1%, respectively).

It is important to note that the BVT route is undertaken within a compulsory stage of schooling and, therefore, it is possible to observe how the gender asymmetry is transferred to the core stage of the Spanish educational system and also to identify the capacity of BVT to generate new opportunities for life and career reorientation (Cacheiro, García and Moreno 2016).

In light of the professional focus given to this pathway, the future employment of the students is likely to lie in elementary occupations, (including unskilled work in services, agriculture, fishing, construction, manufacturing and transport workers), 58% of whom are women¹⁰.

Furthermore, data provided by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training on the transition from vocational training to the job market reveal that, in the case of BVT, it is easier to find a job in the most male-dominated fields than in the most female-dominated fields. The highest average recruitment rate in the professional categories included in BVT was observed in the most male-dominated categories: Mechanical Manufacturing (50.7%) and Transportation and Vehicle Maintenance (49.3%). Meanwhile, Personal Image and Administration and Management presented average recruitment rates of 39.5%

¹⁰ Prepared by the authors based on data from the Labour Force Survey, second quarter of 2019. INE. Data retrieved from www.ine.es (consulted in June 2020).

and 34.4%, respectively¹¹. It seems that the more male-dominated categories lead to employment more quickly than the more female-dominated categories. Vocational training could end up generating better job opportunities for men than for women, thereby exacerbating the existing gender inequalities (Millenaar 2014; Niemeyer and Colley 2015; Høst, Seland and Skålholt 2015).

In short, BVT is not only a highly male-dominated pathway, but the few girls who do enrol do so in a very limited number of professional categories, including those that have traditionally corresponded to women, which have lower material and symbolic value (Barberà, Candela and Ramos 2008; Vergés-Bosch 2012).

BVT as an element of gender conformity

Most students we interviewed showed little agency in their decisions to pursue BVT. They understood that their options, after an academic journey characterized by poor academic results, absenteeism and some degree of disconnection from the normal pace of the classroom, were reduced to dropping out entirely or carrying on with their schooling through BVT, a view shared by their teachers:

“It wasn’t going well for me, so I went to talk to the psychologist [...]. And she told me that, since I was 16, she was going to get me all the papers I needed to study a BVT programme and that it would last two years, which would allow me to graduate and get a qualification to work in that field.” [E17, boy, Electricity and Electronics]

BVT has thus emerged as an alternative to ESO that allows students to obtain a school qualification more easily and, hopefully, more in line with their interests. It is not so much

¹¹ Data relating to the third year in the case of the 2015-2016 cohort. Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. Consulted in September 2020.

a question of choosing something they want to do, but of opting for whatever they are able to do to stay within the system.

Moreover, many of the students we interviewed did not attach great importance to the pathway they chose; they had prioritized their need to obtain an academic qualification over any other concerns, which they felt could be postponed until later, once they had finished ESO, albeit via the shortcut offered by BVT. This deferment of their true interests, including choosing a different FP pathway, going to university or continuing the family business, is exacerbated by the fact that they struggle to think about the future, and the majority expressed a preference to focus on the present: *“I don’t like thinking about the future. Whenever I do, I feel overwhelmed [...] I’ll see what happens when I’m 40. At the moment I’m only 17 and I don’t want to agonize over my future.”*¹² [E02, boy, Agriculture Gardening and Flower Arrangement]

In addition, it is important to consider the consequences of implementing BVT in the Valencian Community, where the centres are concentrated in just a few cities and centres all too often choose professional categories based on their resources in terms of teachers and infrastructure and not so much on the training and job situation in the region where they are located.

Moreover, these students are still young (16-17 years old) and lack autonomy in terms of mobility in a region with limited public transport options, especially in the most remote counties, far away from the city of Valencia and the surrounding metropolitan area. This situation stems largely from the specific features of the region under study (Azagra and Romero 2007; Ariño 2018) and, above all, on the students’ limited negotiating power due to their academic record. Thus, we observed that many students remained at the centre

¹² Many of the interviews were conducted in Catalan, the students’ vehicular language, and have been translated to make the text easier to read.

where they were already studying ESO and simply enrolled in one of the options (sometimes the only option) offered by the centre. In fact, a few of the interviews clearly revealed that the students were forced to do something that did not interest them in the least. It is also important to point out here, as Navas et al (2021) do in their study on vocational training in Valencia, the institutional disinterest in integrating the BVT in the same educational centres. Classrooms, dynamics and even teachers (mostly temporary and with little experience) occupy places, real and symbolic, invisible to the whole of the educational centre where they are located. However, most students defended their decision to opt for a particular professional category, made virtually out of necessity, by presenting a quasi-vocational story, revising their childhood and the dynamics of their daily life and cherry-picking information to clearly justify their decision, in line with the “vocational habitus” referred to by Colley et al. (2003).

“Q: Why didn’t you choose joinery?”

A - Because I’m crazy about beauty. I swear, I’m crazy about it...

Q - But what do you like about it?

A - Everything. [...] I swear. Make-up, nails, waxing... Everything. I love absolutely everything about it. I’m just so passionate about it.” [E29, girl, Hair and Beauty]

“I wanted to do it because I’ve loved building things ever since I was a child. I always got Meccano for birthdays and Christmas.” [E16, boy, Electricity and Electronics]

“...because I do my make-up, I do my eyebrows, I paint my nails... so I decided to choose that, because it’s more or less what I do at home anyway.” [E31, girl, Hair and Beauty]

The majority defended their decision to study a speciality by arguing that it was a vocational choice. However, this is at odds with the finding that just two out of the 35 interviewees defied gender expectations and opted for a category that was not expected of them: a girl in Electricity and Electronics and a boy in Hair and Beauty. This number may be too small to draw conclusions in this regard, but it highlights the clear social pressure in educational decision-making to comply with gender expectations, which is determined, first and foremost, by the number of boys or girls in the class.

“To be honest, I was surprised to see a girl in the class. I said to myself, ‘Wow, a girl in the automotive programme!’” [E24, boy, Vehicle Maintenance]

“There’s a boy studying joinery who loves hairdressing but didn’t sign up because the class was full of girls and there wasn’t a single boy.” [E28, girl, Hair and Beauty]

This fear of being the only boy or girl in the class was expressed in almost all interviews, despite the fact that the two outliers interviewed did not view it as a problem. This is perhaps because, as pointed out by Mariño and Rial (2019), a single person who breaks a gender mandate is more readily accepted than a group that does so, even a small one. This fear arises from the students’ need for company on the paths they take, to make friends in the class and to not feel excluded from shared activities and conversations. *In this sense, we could identify the importance of group pressure in their decisions, the group's ability to model occupational expectations (Beckmann, 2021).*

Moreover, the pressure to behave in a certain way, according to gender, was pivotal and clearly discernible in the statements of the interviewees. There was a strong presence of gender and binary prejudice in the statements. Homophobic slurs appeared in virtually every interview. Furthermore, there was clear contempt for female-dominated pathways

and, thus, for the skills and tasks traditionally associated with women. As a result, boys were more likely than girls to reject these fields, and the negative considerations received by those who go beyond these expectations by appealing directly to their sex, as we have already seen in other studies (Francis, 1999; Jackson, 2006).

“I think boys are scared of taking hairdressing because they see it as more of a women’s job. So they’re scared of being called effeminate or something, because it’s happened loads of times”. [E31, girl, Hair and Beauty]

“Q - Was joinery your first choice?

A - Yes.

Q - Why not hairdressing?

A - Well, it’s just that, I don’t know... If I’d signed up for it, at the time I thought I’d be called... a girl or, you know...

Q - You can say it.

A - OK, well, gay or something. So I thought, this is what all the boys sign up for, so I’ll just do it too, and that’s that.” [E35, boy, Joinery and Furniture]

These statements contrast with the scarce didactic content on equality that we have found in previous research directed at VBT students (Obiol et al., 2020) and which seems to be generalized within our Vocational Training in general (Rial and Mariño, 2019). The students’ knowledge and expectations of the world of work play a key role in this gender conformity and, as highlighted in other studies, represent a major gender socialization factor (Polavieja and Platt, 2010; Platt and Polavieja, 2016). The students in our sample appeared to be greatly influenced by the employment status of their parents, most of whom had a basic level of education and a high rate of manual and low-skilled jobs.

“Yes, I like cooking more. It’s basically what I like best, more than being in a garage or whatever. Also, my mum had a restaurant and when I was little I loved being in the restaurant.” [E08, girl, Cooking and Catering]

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that the most traditional gender norms live on, and the students even seemed to accept the increased precariousness associated with being a woman. For example, subject E14, who was studying Electricity and Electronics, accepted the teachers’ assertion that girls earn less, solely because they are girls working in the field of electricity.

Discussion

In this study, we used a gender perspective to analyse basic vocational training, an educational route created by the Spanish government in an attempt to prevent early school leaving and that has been pointed out for its limited capacity to reverse inequality, rather the opposite (Bonal, Tarabini and Verger, 2015; Tarabini and Montes, 2015). A clearly masculinized academic cycle, which points to a worse relationship of boys with the educational system was already studied in other countries. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon case, this became the subject of political and media debate, strengthening gender stereotypes. At the same time, the centrality of this debate once again left out girls, those who fail and those who do not (Reay, 2001; Francis, 1999; Jackson, 2006).

Our research emphasizes the gender inequality that emerges from segregation by sex of their different professional families. The statistics analyzed show a clear segregation by sex of the BVT as a whole and the concentration of the girls who study it in a few professional families: those that have traditionally been considered typical of women, as is the case of Hairdressing and Personal Image.

Studying BVT requires a student to make two decisions: the decision to undertake BVT and the decision to take a particular professional category. All of this occurs within the compulsory stage of schooling. The result of these decisions, as we have shown, highlights the fact that students choose traditional training options with a gender focus that reflects the traditional gender division still underlying the labour market. (Evans, 2006; Vidal and Merino, 2020). The interviewed students indicate the important weight of their structural position, drawn here from gender.

Even in the discourses of the interviewees, their agency is significantly diluted, unlike what we have seen in other educational cycles (Obiol, 2017). The young people we interviewed expressed that their choices were made out of necessity (Bourdieu, 1998; Colley et al. 2003). They opted for BVT because their position within the school setting precluded all other options to continue within the system, and they chose professional categories associated with a particular gender because there were no other options available to them due to the way the system is organized, nor did they want to risk being further penalized by their environment.

They conformed based on expectations about gender. The boys did not dare to choose “girly” subjects. The girls, on the other hand, claimed that they would dare to choose traditionally male subjects, but in reality they did not. Gender socialization appears as an essential factor to understand why girls opt for some training and career paths and not others (Polavieja and Platt, 2010; Polavieja and Platt, 2010). However, a complex gender socialization as well, as Anyon (1984) pointed out, in which we find discourses and expectations resistant to such socialization, despite its practices.

Therefore, BTV becomes an educational stage clearly segregated by sex-gender, as we can see in data and in previous research about Spanish Vocational Training (Mariño and

Rial, 2019; Merino 2020). Moreover, the way girls conform to expectations in their school years follows them into the labour market, similarly to what we have seen in previous research (Cáceres, Escot and Sanz, 2004; Burchell et al., 2014; Torns and Recio, 2012; Obiol et al., 2020; Stam and Keskiner, 2020). Therefore, a system that allows them to choose in a way that is not based on gender should be a priority in our educational policies, and should obviously be accompanied by egalitarian labour policies as Brockmann notes (2020).

Conclusions: decisions made out of necessity

The main conclusion of our research is that forcing students to make these decisions at such an early stage, as BVT does, promotes this gender conformity. Thus, an education system that requires students to make early curricular choices encourages them to make more traditional, gender-based decisions, more so than in the case of more comprehensive systems.

Unlike other educational situations, decisions regarding BVT are made at a time when the focus of interest does not lie in the content of the training itself but in the very existence of the training, in the fact that it represents an option within the system. This is the priority, even for teachers and families. The question is, why are the stereotypes resulting from gender socialization still so strong that they give students the security they need but cannot get elsewhere, and how do the mechanisms of social control that punish any hint of a departure from traditional gender positions still work? As Bernard and Molpeceres (2006) pointed out, these students are directed to a more precarious market and are potentially more constrained by gender norms.

Finally, our objective was to better understand the reasons underlying the huge asymmetry observed in BVT pathways. We found that the risk of early school leaving

provides a framework of options constrained by a traditional, gender-based view of the labour market.

More in-depth research on this subject is required, but it would also be interesting to carry out future studies on how young women who have escaped from this social control and transgressed gender expectations at this stage of schooling managed to do so. Their experiences and reactions to their environment would also provide us with reflections that would offer insight into the gender inequality in our education system.

References

- Anyon Jean. 1984. "Intersections of Gender and Class: Accommodation and Resistance by Working-Class and Affluent Females to Contradictory Sex Role Ideologies". *Journal of Education*;166(1):25-48. doi:10.1177/002205748416600104
- Archer, Louise, Julie Moote, Emily MacLeod, Becky Francis and Jennifer DeWitt. 2020. *ASPIRES 2: Young people's science and career aspirations, age 10-19*. London: UCL Institute of Education
- Ariño, Antonio (coord.). 2018. *La sociedad valenciana en transformación (1975-2025)*. València: Institució Alfons el Magnànim, Universitat de València.
- Azagra, Joaquín, and Joan Romero. 2007. *País complex: canvi social i polítiques públiques en la societat valenciana (1977-2006)*. València: Universitat de València.
- Barberà, Esther, Carlos Candela, and Amparo Ramos. 2008. "Elección de carrera, desarrollo profesional y estereotipos de género". *Revista de Psicología Social* 23 (2): 275-285. doi: //doi.org/10.1174/021347408784135805

Beck, Ulrich, and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 2003. *La individualización. El individualismo institucionalizado y sus consecuencias sociales y políticas*. Barcelona: Paidós.

Beck, Vanessa, Alison Fuller, and Lorna Unwin. 2006. "Safety in stereotypes? The impact of gender and 'race' on young people's perceptions of their post-compulsory education and labour market opportunities". *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (5): 667-686. doi:10.1080/01411920600895718

Beckmann, Janina. 2021. "Gendered career expectations in context: the relevance of normative and comparative reference groups", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 42:7, 968-988, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2021.1914547

Bernad, Joan Carles, and María Ángeles Molpeceres. 2006. "Discursos emergentes sobre la educación en los márgenes del sistema educativo". *Revista de educación* 341: 149-170.

Bonal, Xavier, Aina Tarabini, and Antoni Verger. 2015. "La nova política educativa i les desigualtats". *Nous Horitzons* 209: 16-21.

Brockmann, Michaela. 2021. " 'It doesn't take much force' – The negotiation of gender by two women motor mechanic apprentices through the biographical lens", *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 73:3, 436-454, DOI: 10.1080/13636820.2020.1734061

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1988. *La distinción. Criterio y bases sociales del gusto*. Madrid: Taurus,

Burchell, Brendan, Vincent Hardy, Jill Rubery, and Mark Smith. 2014. *A new method to understand occupational gender segregation in European labour markets*. European Commission-Directorate-General for Justice. doi: 10.2838/748887

Cáceres, Juan I.; Lorenzo Escot, Javier Sainz. 2004. *La segregación ocupacional sectorial de la mujer en el mercado de trabajo español*. Documento de Trabajo. Facultad CC.EE: Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

Cacheiro, María L., Francisco García, and Antonio J. Moreno. 2016. "Las TIC en los programas de Formación Profesional Básica en Ceuta". *Apertura* 7(2): 132-151.

Casado Martínez, Carlos, Julio Meneses Naranjo, and Teresa Sancho Vinuesa. 2016. "¿Cómo ven los alumnos de primaria la profesión informática? Influencia del género y la percepción de su capacidad". *Píxel-Bit. Revista de Medios y Educación* 49: 149-161. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/pixelbit.2016.i49.010>

Castaño, Cecilia, and Juliet Webster. 2014. *Género, ciencia y tecnologías de la información*. Madrid: Editorial Aresta.

Colley, Helen, David James, Kim Diment, and Michael Tedder. 2003. "Learning as becoming in vocational education and training: class, gender and the role of vocational habitus". *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 55(4): 471-498. doi: 10.1080/13636820300200240

Evans, Karen. 2006. "Achieving equity through 'gender autonomy': the challenges for VET policy and practice". *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 58(4): 393-408. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820601005453>

Gillies, Val. 2005. "Raising the 'Meritocracy': Parenting and the Individualization of Social Class". *Sociology*, 39 (5): 835-853. doi:10.1177/0038038505058368

González, Ana M., Núria Vergés, and José S. Martínez. 2017. "Las mujeres en el mercado de trabajo de las tecnologías". *REIS: Revista española de investigaciones sociológicas*, 159: 73-90. doi:10.5477/cis/reis.159.73

- Fernández, Ana Belén, and Marta Ibáñez. 2018. "Más mujeres en los estudios de Informática: una propuesta desde el departamento de formación y orientación laboral". *Revista de Sociología de la Educación-RASE* 11(1): 116-134. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7203/RASE.11.1.10624>
- Francis, Becky. 1999. "Lads, Lasses and (New) Labour: 14-16-year-old students' responses to the 'laddish behaviour and boys' underachievement' debate", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20:3, 355-371, DOI: 10.1080/01425699995317
- Hardy, Vincent, Brendan Burchell, Jill Rubery, and Mark Smith. 2015. *New method to understand occupational gender segregation in European labour markets*. European Commission. doi: 10.2838/748887
- Høst, Hakon, Iduun Seland, and Asgeir Skålholt. 2015. "Gender policies meet VET practices—the case of health and social care in Norway". *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 67(1): 109-126. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2014.958869>
- Ibáñez, Marta. 2008. "La segregación ocupacional por sexo a examen. Características personales, de los puestos y de las empresas asociadas a las ocupaciones masculinas y femeninas". *REIS: Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* 123: 87-122. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/40184894>
- Jackson, Carolyn. 2006. "'Wild' girls? An exploration of 'ladette' cultures in secondary schools". *Gender and Education* 18(4): 339-360. doi: 10.1080/09540250600804966
- Jackson, Carolyn, and Penny Tinkler. 2007. "'Ladettes' and 'Modern Girls': 'Troublesome' Young Femininities". *The Sociological Review* 55(2): 251-272. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2007.00704.x>

Julià Cano, Albert. 2018. "Las trayectorias educativas de hombres y mujeres jóvenes. Una aproximación desde el análisis de secuencias". *Papers: revista de sociologia*, 103, 1, 5-28
<https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.2290>

Mariño, Raquel, and Antonio Rial. 2019. "Balance de las necesidades formativas demandadas por mujeres que cursan o que han cursado ciclos de FP en familias profesionales masculinizadas: el caso de Galicia". *Educación* 55/1: 251-272. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/educar.890>.

Merino, Rafael. 2020. "Formación profesional y género: desigualdades que persisten, algunos cambios y debates pendientes". *Revista de Sociología de la Educación-RASE* 13(3): 305-307. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7203/RASE.13.3.17444>

Millenaar, Verónica. 2014. "Trayectorias de inserción laboral de mujeres jóvenes pobres: el lugar de los programas de Formación Profesional y sus abordajes de género". *Trabajo y sociedad* 22: 325-339.

Navas Saurin, Almudena, Míriam Abiétar López, Joan Carles Bernad García, Ana Isabel Córdoba Iñesta, Elena Giménez Urraco, Esperanza Meri Crespo and Elena Quintana Murci. 2021. "Implicación del estudiantado en Formación Profesional: análisis diferencial en la provincia de Valencia". *Revista de educación*, 394, 189-214

Niemeyer, Beatrix and Helen Colley. 2015. "Why Do We Need (Another) Special Issue on Gender and VET?". *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 67 (1): 1-10, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1363_6820.2014.971498

Obiol-Francés, Sandra. 2017. "Anar a la universitat, una decisió només individual? El paper de la família". In Villar, Alicia (coord.) *La decisió d'anar a la universitat. Processos d'orientació i transicions educatives en temps d'incertesa*. València: Editorial Tirant lo Blanch, 67-86.

Obiol-Francés, Sandra, Elisabet Almeda Samaranch, Dino Di Nella, Nuria Pumar Beltrán, Aida Ruiz Franco, Núria Vergés-Bosch, and Alicia Villar-Aguilés. 2020. “¿Una orientación marcada por el género? El caso de la Formación Profesional Básica valenciana”. *Revista de Sociología de la Educación-RASE* 13(3): 371-391. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7203/RASE.13.3.16666>

Palencia-Esteban, Amaia and Coral del Rio, 2020. "The earnings effects of occupational segregation in Europe: The role of gender and migration status," *Working Papers 533, ECINEQ, Society for the Study of Economic Inequality*.

Platt, Lucinda, and Javier G.3 Polavieja. 2016. “Saying and Doing Gender: The Intergenerational Transmission of Attitudes towards the Sexual Division of Labour”. *European Sociological Review* 32(6): 820-834. doi: 10.1093/esr/jcw037

Polavieja, Javier G. and Lucinda Platt. 2010. “Girls like Pink: Explaining Sex-Typed Occupational Aspirations amongst Young Children”. *IMDEA Working Paper* No. 2010-19.

Reay, Diane. 2001. “Spice girls, 'nice girls', 'girlies' and tomboys: Gender discourses, girls' cultures and femininities in the primary classroom”, *Gender and Education*, 13 (2),153-166.

Rujas, Javier. 2017. “Dispositivos institucionales y gestión del fracaso escolar: las paradojas de la atención a la diversidad en la ESO”. *Cuadernos de Relaciones Laborales* 35(2): 327-345. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5209/CRLA.56776>

Rujas, Javier. 2020. “Cómo se calma al primo en la ESO: la externalización a PCPI y la subjetivación de la selección escolar”. *Revista de Sociología de la Educación-RASE* 13 (4): 546. <https://doi.org/10.7203/RASE.13.4.18069>.

Sainz, Milagros. 2011. "Factors which influence girls' orientations to ICT subjects in schools. Evidence from Spain. *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* 3(2): 387-406.

Sainz, Milagros, Rachel Pálmen and Sara García-Cuesta. 2012. "Parental and secondary school teachers' perceptions of ICT professionals, gender differences and their role in the choice of studies". *Sex roles* 66(3-4): 235-249. doi: 10.1007/s11199-011-0055-9

Tarabini-Castellani, Aina and Alejandro Montes. 2015. La agenda política contra el abandono escolar prematuro en España: La LOMCE contra las evidencias internacionales. *Avances en supervisión educativa: Revista de la Asociación de Inspectores de Educación de España*, 23. Download: <https://avances.adide.org/index.php/ase/article/view/20/21>

Torns, Teresa, and Carolina Recio. 2012. Las desigualdades de género en el mercado de trabajo: entre la continuidad y la transformación. *Revista de economía crítica*, 14(2), 178-202.

Vázquez-Cupeiro, Susana. 2015. "Ciencia, estereotipos y género: una revisión de los marcos explicativos". *Convergencia* 22(68): 177-202. doi: 10.29101/crcs.v0i68.2957

Vergés-Bosch, Núria. 2012. "De la exclusión a la autoinclusión de las mujeres en las TIC. Motivaciones, posibilitadores y mecanismos de autoinclusión". *Athenea Digital. Revista de pensamiento e investigación social* 12(3): 129-150. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/athenead/v12n3.1042>

Vergés-Bosch, Núria, León Freude, and Sandra Obiol-Francés, Sandra. 2019. *Claves para la atracción y permanencia de las mujeres en la formación profesional TIC*. <https://roderic.uv.es/handle/10550/76621>

Vidal, Laia and Rafael Merino. 2020. "Desigualdades de género y formación profesional: Elecciones, abandono y expectativas". *Revista de Sociología de la Educación-RASE* 13 (3): 392-414. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7203/RASE.13.3.16645>.

Villar-Aguilés, Alicia, and Sandra Obiol-Francés. 2020. "Itinerarios generizados en Formación Profesional Básica. Resultados de un estudio en centros educativos valencianos". *RECERCA. Revista de Pensament i Anàlisi* (28): 1-25. doi: <http://www.e-revistes.uji.es/index.php/recerca/article/view/4403>

Alicia Villar Aguilés y Sandra Obiol Francés . 2021. "Educació i formació" en María José Alarcón García; Mercedes Alcañiz Moscardó; María Rosa Cerdá Hernández; Amparo Mañés Barbé; María-José Rodríguez Jaume (coords.) *Las mujeres en la Comunitat Valenciana. Una aproximación sociológica*. València: Tirant lo Blanch.
págs. 171-216