The construction of competent professional identities from the experience of the Topi hospitality school

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Abstract

TOPI School of Hospitality (TOPI SH) offers no formal vocational training in the fields of culinary and hospitality services addressed to youngsters between 16 and 25 years. Most of these students have lived educational exclusion processes before to access to training program and after that, most of the former students are recognized as professionals characterized by their competence and creativity in the hospitality industry. Based on a case study and after a brief review of the theoretical framework, this paper identify some relational and subjective elements which play a key role in educational exclusion and inclusion process, focus on those which enable students to move forward and favour the construction of competent professional identities among these youngsters from their own perspective.

Keywords

initial vocational qualification programmes; educational exclusion; local education policy; professional identities.

1   Different pathways to the same Vocational Education and Training´s promise

CEDEFOP defines Vocational Education and Training (VET) as "education and training which aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market" (CEDEFOP, 2014, p.292). Despite such simple definition, the process of industrialization in Europe didn´t produce one uniform vocational training model. On the contrary, a myriad of VET patterns were set up to replace the predecessor roughly homogeneous craft-trade-based vocational training methods (CEDEFOP, 2004). These processes have been increased recently across a wide range of countries and as result, distinctive forms of post-secondary education have been set up for those who do not follow well-worn academic routes from school to university (Bathmaker, 2017).

Exists international consensus about the important role that VET can play in order to promote pathways to social inclusion. This is not new, as far this assumption about the benefits of VET have been made repeatedly since the late nineteenth century, remarking positive effects regarding to economic growth as well as to social inclusion (Nilsson, 2010). Indeed, VET is pointed as one of the most effective mechanisms to promote social equity through equipping citizens to participate in continuously changing labour market that characterise our contemporary society (UNESCO, 2015). However, empirical evidences show how the role of VET is dependent on the social and political contexts in which it operates and, particularly,

depends on how institutions as well as the two sides of industry (employers and trade unions, chambers of commerce, federations of industrialists, etc.) are involved (Nilsson, 2010).

VET has been specially considered suitable for youngsters who have lived some kind of educational exclusion process, as early school leavers (ESL) or those who are not in education, employment or training (OECD, 2012). Observations and data from many European countries have revealed the particular relevance of the local level to provide pertinent attention to these of youngsters from an inclusive VET perspective (European Agency, 2013). In addition, part of the modern VET models were developed in response to social needs by political or citizenship movements and based on education experiences (Tiana, 2016).

Educational exclusion is often interpreted as the direct and mechanical consequence of socio-economic conditions occurring outside of the formal educational borders (Sayed 2003) but there are many more factors involved and it´s a process tremendously complex which entails a denial of the right to education (Escudero, 2016). So educational exclusion is generated not only by the dynamics of social exclusion, as it is also produced within and by education and training institutions through their actors, their relations, their practices and their effects on the construction of individual subjectivities among students (Tarabini, 2018a; Tarabini 2018b). Some of these relational and subjective factors can play a key role also in the inclusion process as well as in the processes of formation of identity and the meaning of work (Zacarés, 2006), in reference to the construction of competent professional identities.

Taking in account this framework and based on case study, we describe the TOPI School of Hospitality experience, as part of one of those local programs emerged in response to social needs by synergetic interaction between Local Administration (without any responsibilities in the field of education) and the commitment of organized citizens. An initiative aimed to youngsters who lived educational exclusion processes and who were interested in vocational and labour market training courses that could offered a rapid incorporation to the labour market. In many cases, this rapid incorporation to the labour market related to professional profiles of low qualification. Nevertheless, the TOPI School of Hospitality experience is significant because its former students have become, time over, in outstanding professionals who are well recognised by hospitality industry in Aragón and Spain.

1.1 Zaragoza City Council´s Socio-occupational Centres Network: VET from a local level commitment

Zaragoza City Council´s Socio-occupational Centres Network it´s integrated by 12 training centres, commonly called "CSL Network". CSL Network is a key component of the local VET policy, which is developed in coordination with the Government of Aragón and its Department of Education, the regional education authority.

As other local facilities that emerged at the end of the 1980s from the sphere of social intervention (Merino, 2013), this local network arose in the eighties resulting from the synergetic interaction of the Zaragoza City Council and neighborhood associations (Gimeno, 2018). In that moment, efforts converged seeking alternatives against social exclusion lived by a significant part of the youth population, particularly youngsters who lived in neighborhoods which concentrated social disadvantages and a socially responsible and committed citizens. CSL Network focused on young people who dropped out from schools and set up training alternatives for them, increasing -over time- the pre-existing official training offer (García Goncet, 2018). As result, different actors (associations, foundations, NGOs… and the City Council) took responsibility for ensuring the right to education for youngsters.

Nowadays, CSL Network provide formal and non-formal educational services and social support to youngsters who -in most cases- either are externalized from secondary schools before finishing their Compulsory Education, or have finished it without a certificate. On average, every year, 500 students follow different courses offered by CSL Network. Although

these non-formal actors (City Council and associations, foundations…) are mostly oriented to encourage the incorporation to the labor market by offering VET addressed to professional profiles of low qualification (Termes, 2012), some training programs which are provided by CSL Network are also highly prestigious in their productive sectors.

2 The TOPI School of Hospitality

The TOPI School of Hospitality (TOPI SH) offers vocational training in the fields of culinary and hospitality services addressed to youngsters between 16 and 25 years. It was established in 1989 by Picarral Foundation, a grassroots organization located in Zaragoza (Spain), as citizen initiative to seek out further opportunities to youngsters who were dropped out of school and were in risk of social exclusion. Nowadays, TOPI SH still running by Picarral Foundation and keeping the aim to work for those who have to face difficult and unfair situations. Besides, TOPI SH is part of the Zaragoza City Council´s Socio-occupational Centres Network.

TOPI SH offers a training program consisted of two academic years, from September to June. It is free of charge and easily accessible because no certificate or official diploma is required to access to TOPI SH. During this time, youngsters can choose between achieve a professional waiter diploma or professional cookery diploma, both of them recognised and accredited as Level 2 by the Spanish National System for Qualifications and Vocational Training (SNCFP in Spanish). About 55 students follow the training program each academic year. They are formally organized in four groups, according to their respective areas of specialisation and grade (first or second grade). Each group has maximum 15 members and it´s assisted by supervising professor or guide.

2.1 Key data from TOPI SH

TOPI SH is located in Picarral neighborhood. Its main structure is comprised by a 1,500-square-meter building, which is full equip, joining adequate resources as training center and as an workplace of the hospitality industry. Nevertheless, part of this building (common services as computer lab) are shared with others training programs. Furthermore, its structure is compromised by a large team of professionals: 2 bar and restaurant service teachers, 2 cookery teachers, 1 pastry teacher and the support of the Counseling and Guidance Department (social worked, psychologist and pedagogue, staff shared with others training programs and activities). Therefore, TOPI SH has adequate physical facilities and equipment, small classes and a very low teacher-student ratio. In addition, the methodology focus on practice and it´s lead by "learning by doing", imitating work centers (restaurants) as organizational model. As result, students can find new spaces that are far away from traditional schools and put them close to a real work situation. Moreover, all this implies real opportunities for encounter and mutual knowledge among all person involved in the training program.

Throughout this time, TOPI SH has achieved significant outcomes, becoming in a benchmark for success and its former students are recognized as professionals characterized by their competence in the hospitality industry. It reflects this reality the huge number of youngsters who apply for admission every year, sometimes all most ten times the places available. It points in the same direction two indicators: outcome of satisfaction surveys of the students and the rate of professional insertion among them who finish their training program.

Based on available information from the Quality Management Systems[1], it´s possible to gather data in a diachronic perspective. Over time, results of satisfaction surveys show high satisfaction (above 80%) in two key aspects: overall satisfaction and training program satisfaction. Students' responses express a sustained high level of satisfaction with their learning experience.
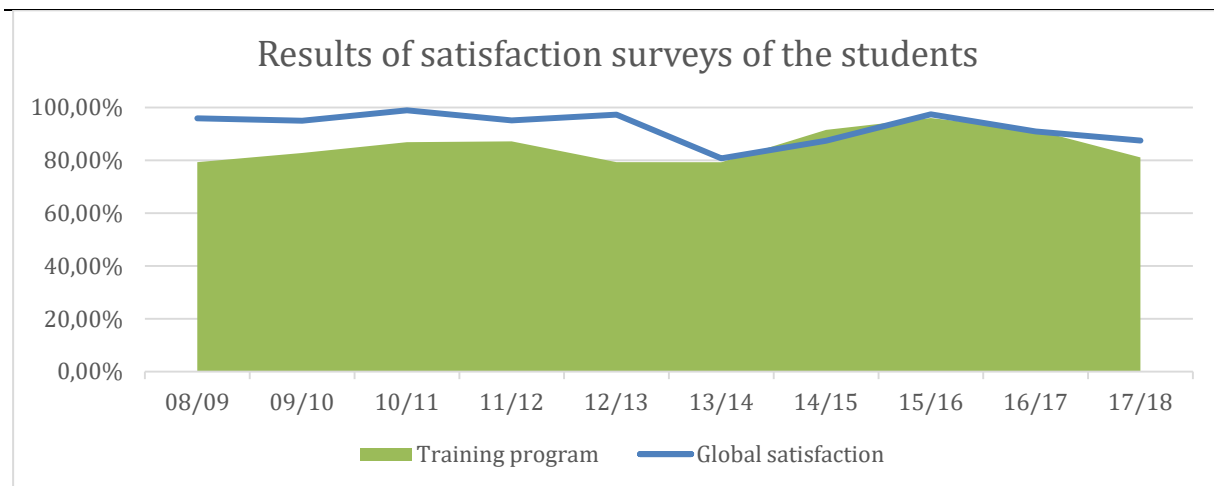

Figure 1   Results of satisfaction surveys of the students from 2008/2009 to 2017/2018.

Another relevant data about the results and impact of the training program is derived from the rate of professional insertion. This indicator can provide information about how the hospitality industry considered the training program and, moreover, how this productive sector estimate professional and personal competences with which are equipped TOPI SH´s students. In this regard, the available information indicates that youngsters who have been trained in the TOPI SH have no many difficulties to find a job directly linked to their profession. Without considering different situations and diverse interests of students at the end of their training period, during the last ten years, at least 50% of them could find a job. While in the last five years, on overage, almost the 95% of them found an easy transition to work.

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[1]   TOPI School of Hospitality´s Quality Management System (QMS) is certificaed following quality standards as ISO9001 and SGE21 quality regulations, following the EFQM model for excellence. This QMS provides firm information about processes, results and impact associated with the training program.
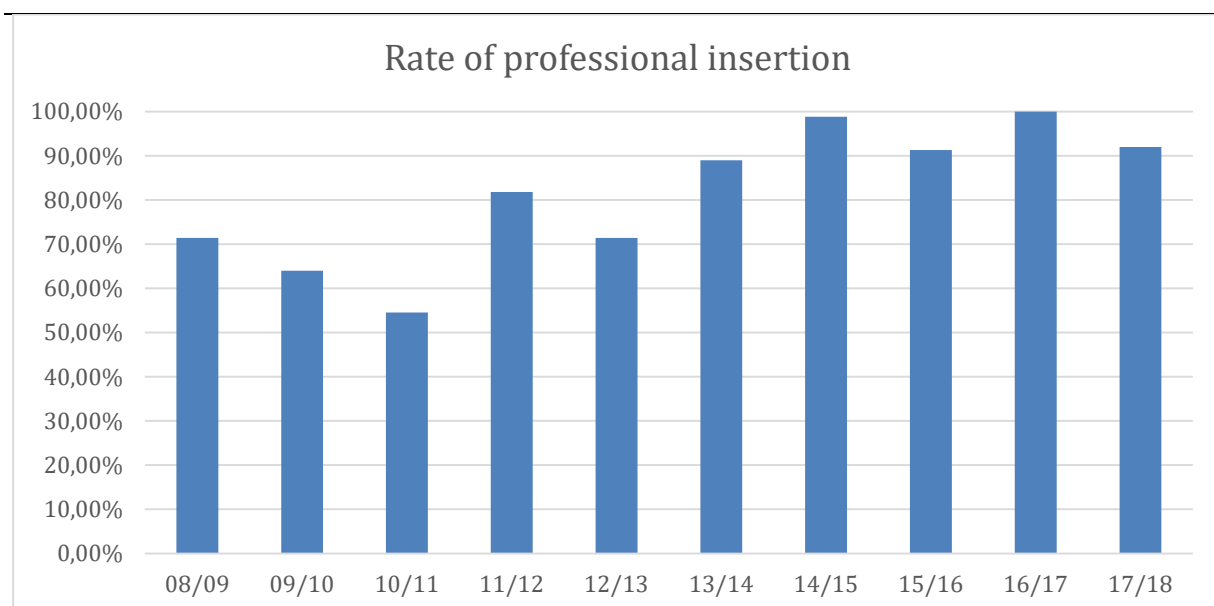
Figure 2   Rate of professional insertion among students who finished their training program from 2008/2009 to 2017/2018.

2.2. The voice of the students.

During the development of the applied research implemented since 2016 to 2018 by the project "Innovation and educational success in the Zaragoza City Council´s Socio-occupational Centers Network" (#innovaCSL), four former students of the TOPI SH were interviewed as part of the mentioned research. Interviews focus on topics related with their own experience as learners across all educational stages; self-assessment as learners; relationship with their education and training centers, relationship with their teachers and other students; support measures to achieve educational and training objectives; transition from training to work; and professional prospects for the future. Information collected by this process were ordered as life stories (Bertaux, 2005) and the results indicated that students appreciated expressly the following aspects of their experience as TOPI SH´s students:

- Direct connection between training program and real life ("*In my transition to work I didn´t find anything that I didn´t know. The entire basic knowledge we can learn it from our teachers in the TOPI SH and from there, you can still learning until become in an outstanding professional.*").
- Relationship established with teachers and rest of students ("*In the high school I was just a number. They didn´t know me and I did not really know them. There it´s different and now I can say that my teachers are, in same way, my friends*").
- "Learning by doing" teaching method as real active learning ("*I´m good learning if I can see what I have to do and I´m a good learner if I can practice. Here you spend most of the time practicing and finally you learn and manage every task*").
- Positive experiences where they can be recognised as a professional ("*You can participate in international exchanges and show-cooking in different contexts. It´s not easy and I used to feel stressed out but, after that, you feel that you have something important to show and you learn a lot of*").
- Sense of work and professional linked to arts and as a way of personal development ("*Teachers transmit their love for their profession. I never had a hobby or something like*

that. Now, I find something that it´s my job and my hobby at the same time. I really like what I do, I like my profession.").

3   Conclusions.

Following to Helms Jørgensen (2013), we can confirm that:

"educational institutions and labour organizations are the framework of the daily social and cultural life of people, their personal interaction and the formation of their identities (...) Social institutions must also be seen as subjectively significant and culturally valuable for the people who make them up and actively contribute to maintaining and changing them" (Helms Jørgensen, 2013).

TOPI SH fulfil a series of characteristic that have proven their effectiveness to build competent professional identities among youngsters who have lived educational exclusion processes. More research is needed to identify details involved in these processes but by the moment, we could collect information that support this affirmation. Furthermore, the TOPI SH´s experience testifies to the important role that educational and training centres can play in order to promote inclusion and transformation processes for youngsters. In this case study research, existing information indicates the capital impact of an adequate structure that care for professional and personal dimension as well as the special attention paid to develop contexts, relationships and culture that encourage the construction of competent professional identities among youngsters.

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