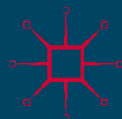# Precarity and Vocational Education and Training

*Craftsmanship and Employability in Romania*

MARIA-CARMEN PANTEA

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*To Carla and Paul, for offering never-ending inspiration.*

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To my parents, Ioan and Olivia, who taught me the value of work meaningful work.

# Contents

# 1

# Introduction

There are certain issues that—at least in the European public space—attracted high consensus: volunteering, youth entrepreneurship and initial vocational education and training (VET). They all share such an overwhelming positive social load that it is hard to find alternative discourses. It is hard to imagine reasons for which VET would *not* be inherently something societally good, economically needed if not close to a panacea. It is loaded with the expectation of poverty alleviation, youth employment, skilled workforce (Wieland 2015; Powell 2015; Eichhorst et al. 2015), economic growth and attraction of investments. VET bridges issues from education theory, sociology of work, youth studies, economy and policy making. It is part of strategies on social inclusion and unemployment reduction, but also on innovation. A recent Cedefop research bluntly states that 'where VET is strong unemployment is low' (Cedefop 2016, p. 1). Economic agents speak about a shortage of skilled workers, policy makers plan an increase in the number of young people in VET, whilst media promotes successful stories of young women and men who chose VET and a trade (most often as an alternative to a university degree and an option for materiality at the expense of liberal education). All this indicates that, indeed, we expect a lot from VET (Grubb 2001).

Yet, VET is not without its dilemmas. Back in 2002, Alison Wolf, a leading expert on education and skills, questioned the assumption that low-level vocational courses should be the default 'offer' for 'less academic' pupils. She made a well-argued case in favour of increased investment in education at the elementary school level, as the crucial skills in the labour market are, according to her, mathematical and linguistic. In a radical way, she argued against the policy hypocrisy of promoting initial VET, whilst titling a chapter 'A great idea for other people's children' (Wolf 2002). Later, she argued: *There of course remains a risk that some schools will, as has happened in the past, effectively write off some of their least academically successful students, and park them in vocational courses irrespective of whether these 'count'* (Wolf Report 2011, p. 113). Nonetheless, in 2011, Cedefop issued a report named 'Vocational education and training is good for you – The social benefits of VET for individuals' which shows that 'initial VET is associated with positive changes in social outcomes for individuals' (2011, p. 116).

In many countries, VET is close to a 'restless' educational area because of hard-to-reconcile interests and competing legitimacies of employers, policy makers, teachers, parents, young people and 'society' by large. Yet, important as they are, young people's perspectives on VET are at best assumed and often not sought after. To a large extent, young people in VET have been a rather invisible social group, close to Roberts' (2011) 'invisible middle': young people who fall in between categories that attract high public attention. In many ways, they are 'ordinary people', at distance from the overqualified graduates or from the exceptional achievements attributed to the emerging young entrepreneurs, and, also, in a different situation than those not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Previous research on VET has been mainly structuralist in nature, as it prioritized labour market needs (Powell 2012). The weak representation of young people's 'voices' from research is in line with their silent, ambivalent status in VET policy making and in the more general thinking about VET. In order to counteract some of the above limitations, this book uses a bottom-up, constructivist understanding of work and education, grounded in young people's views. This research came out of the need to add young people's own views—incomplete and contradictory as

they may be—to the emerging debate on VET. First, it addresses an ethical imperative of bringing young people's voices closer to the centre of VET policy making. Second, it complements the existent discourses through a different type of knowledge, grounded in young people's 'personal epistemologies' (Billett 2011, p. 222) over what VET and work is or should be.

The book sets itself the goal of exploring the process by which young people in initial VET (aged 16–18) try to make sense of their future lives. They are enrolled in a shorter educational track that comes as an alternative to high school education (be it liberal or technical), although some progression routes are later possible. Many have long-term experiences of educational failure, but still, do not make the most disadvantaged group, as they did not drop out, for instance. Their overwhelming majority commute daily from rural areas or small towns. The research tries to understand how young people's views on the type of lives they value are articulated with the (arguably objective) prospects of precarious work and precarious lives. In doing so, the book asks what young people in Romania's VET find important, what they envisage as useful and for what. Starting from a general view on what matters to young people, the research privileges the imagined role of work in young people's projections and examines it through sociological lenses within the interdisciplinary area of youth studies.

## Why Romania and Why Now?

Romania tries to reinstate VET attractiveness in an economic climate shaped by global transformations in the meaning of work. Generally, the long-held notion of employment as secure, with a sense of purpose and progression, based on commitment and achievement (*craftsmanship* cf. Sennett) is shaken. Concerns about the deteriorating quality of jobs start to be experienced in many industries in Romania. Stable work (in production) is increasingly shifting towards precarious work, often in the service sector. By and large, there seems to be a general sense of unease within the labour market where young people now in VET are likely to enter.

Against this backdrop, Standing discussed about people's 'habituation of expecting a life of unstable labour and unstable living' (2014). Chances are that soon many young people now in Romania's VET will have *precarious* jobs. Informed by the notions of *craftsmanship* and *precarity*, this book examines the views on future occupational trajectories held by young people in VET. Do young people see themselves as locked in a process that leads them into precarious work? Do they negotiate options and ways out? Is there something else going on?

By having Romania as a VET case study, the book has to bring on board several core-periphery issues. It argues that the young people in VET meet the criteria of a 'missing middle' group (Steve Roberts 2015) in a country that is itself, part of the 'missing middle': 'not completely Western', yet, not 'exotic' enough to attract by default interest (Cărtărescu 2017). The book frames VET in the broader socio-economic context shaped by a recent history of de-industrialization, massive dismissals and political turmoil. It argues that the process of de-industrialization was a questionable window of opportunity for profit-making and strategic alliances for some, while for many others this was a perpetual experience of losing ground. Terms such as the 'losers of economic transition' were often used to refer to people with low skills, from the countryside or, in more general terms, to social groups without enabling circumstances to adapt to the new economy. In the absence of a policy able to find coherent responses, a neoliberal message of self-governance gained potency. People had to secure individual routes to survival or success. Migration became a solution at both individual and family levels and, due to remittances, for the national economy, as well. The social costs for children, families and communities were high and silent.

The increased access to higher education in Romania brought certain distaste for physical work and situated white-collar work as the normative occupational route. From a period with strong occupational identities, the country is undergoing a stage when many workers see their occupational identities eroded. For the older generation, a sense of nostalgia for a time when skills were valued seems recurrent. Now, it is frequent for workers to first tell the name of the company and not their occupation. The country moved from a robust sense of working class, to a situation where individuals are expected to find

individual solutions (often precarized) for navigating an unfriendly economic climate. Against this context, in 2007, Romania had the lowest general job satisfaction in Europe (Eurofound 2007). Now, the rate of young people in NEET situations is one of the highest in Europe (20.9% cf. Eurostat 2015).

This book unpacks different layers of geographical marginality and ultimately touches upon the condition of the young people in Romania's rural areas, a subpopulation largely absent from youth research. By and large, young people from the rural areas are marginally reflected in the current youth studies. At best, they appear as a distinct subpopulation in a 'case-study' approach. At worst, they are ignored, whilst 'urban-based lives have come to be taken for granted as standard': 'When researchers want to gain an understanding of contemporary youth, they turn to metropolitan lives where, in the relationship between the biographies of individuals and the forces of social change, new approaches to life are forged' (Cuervo and Wyn 2012, p. 1). As young people in Romania's VET are overwhelmingly coming from rural areas, this book brings closer to the centre of academic concern a group that often escapes the analysis. It shows that VET includes a strong component related to space (localism). In this process, the book substantiates more recent calls for reconsidering young people from a spatial, not only from a temporal perspective (Farrugia and Wood 2017).

The limitations of a focus on temporality bring upon the need to reconsider the notion of 'transition', which has a long career in youth studies. While being theoretically useful, we agree that an excessive focus on *transitions* poses the risk of seeing young people as *becomings* and equating them with futurity (Foster and Spencer 2011) and less as *beings*. With this topic, the risk is higher than usual, given the heavy focus on VET as the locus of preparing 'working subjects'. Besides, in a context where adults' (occupational) lives are also 'in transition', fragmented and continuously reconfigured—as it is the case in Romania, linking the concept of 'transition' with young people only is incomplete and biased. The book will, thus, engage prudently with this notion.

Ultimately, the book hopes to contribute at remodelling the view on Romania as a post-communist or transition country *tout court*, as it provokes a cogent debate on how more recent transformations shaped its

society. Communism is, nevertheless, important and there is, indeed, a social and political load that can be attributed to it. The book suggests, however, that we risk simplifying an otherwise rich area of analysis, by omitting from the interpretation, more recent dynamics (e.g. migration, reindustrialization and rural shoring, the emergence of precarious work and the development of the service sector).

This book's concern is with young people about to enter the labour market. It comes at a time when sociology of work faces the disturbing reality that it covered with a rather marginal extent young people's working experiences. As rightly pointed out by Thompson and Smith, 'bookshelves are full of studies of culture and consumption rather than production and work' (2009, p. 920). For instance, it was noted that a leading journal such as *Work, Employment and Society* has a disproportionately low number of articles featuring the experiences and condition of young workers (Beck et al. 2016). What is more, the views of young people in VET are largely 'blind spots' in the current scholarship on work. Thus, this research communicates also to the labour process theorists, in the sense that it brings young people's own understanding of work closer to the understanding of complexity involved in labour relations.

It was argued that employers' interest in VET policy making is far from constant. They enter on board when in desperate need for skilled labour force and loose the interest in what goes on in education, in times of some economic equilibrium (Billett 2011). Romania—where VET was the most reformed educational sector—is a case in point. Before 1989, the VET system was based on strong partnerships with companies and to some extent comparable to the German dual system (Nielsen and Le Steen Hansen 1999). Since 1990s, it has been the focus of intense (if not aggressive) changes, which reflected unstable educational, social and economic imperatives. The shifting policy and economic interest of the last decades made the number of young people in VET drop from a total of 285,000 in 1990, to 12,000 in 2011 (Ministry of Education and CNDIPT 2016). At present, after being interrupted for several years, at the pressure of economic agents and EU policy commitments, an increased number of young people will enter VET (Ministry of Education 2016).

VET is at the very bottom of school hierarchies, with liberal or technical education at the top. But the discrepancies within Romania's educational system are an expression of long-term, structural problems, perpetuated and aggravated for decades. By and large, the country has a history of very low investment in education (below 3.5% of GDP cf. Eurostat 2017). For instance, although 43.6% of the entire population lives in rural areas (compared with an EU average of 25%), the investment in rural education has always been minimal. While ten grades are mandatory, when finishing secondary education (at the age of 14/15), because of poor availability of schools in proximity, young people are in the situation of commuting to nearby cities for upper secondary education (high school or VET). Many drop out in this process. The overrepresentation of unqualified teachers in rural areas, together with the closing down and the merging of schools in the name of economic efficiency, increase pre-existent urban-rural discrepancies.

Against this troubled background, Romania has the third highest early school leaving rate[1] in the EU (19.1% in 2015 cf. EC 2016), whilst 42% of those aged 15, countrywide, are functionally illiterate (OECD 2014). Yet, substantiated evidence on young people's long-term prospects and present-day experiences is missing. Unlike other marginalized groups, the perspectives of the young people in VET did not enter—to our knowledge—any consolidated qualitative study. This is where this research aims to contribute.

Methodologically, the book is based on semi-structured interviews/focus groups with over 250 young people (16–18 years.) from 34 VET schools of Romania. Five (of the eight) developmental regions have been included in the research, with an overrepresentation of regions from Transylvania. There were over 2500 pages of interview transcripts: 84 interviews and focus groups with young people, 55 interviews with teachers, nearly 40 interviews with potential employers and policy makers, many field notes. Data was gathered in 2016–2017 by the author and four other researchers (Cristina Faludi, Alina Silian, Ovidiu Oltean and Anatolie Cosciug).

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[1] Ages 18–24.

The need for such a large process of data collection was given by the great heterogeneity in terms of region, rural/ urban and the areas of qualification, which ranged from auto mechanics, constructions, electronics, welding, textile work to bakery, cooking, cosmetics and work in retail.

Interviewed young people are part of the first cohort completing VET after more than a decade of dissolution or alternative, short-lived arrangements. They try to make sense of their status and future in the absence of tangible models. Because of functioning in an educational track without short-term history, the occupational prospects are imagined or promised, yet not substantiated. They need to carry out identity work, while driven apart by unbalanced discourses: a socially experienced sense of inferiority in school versus a policy and media rhetoric of high expectations from VET.

## Structure and Organization

Chapter 2 examines the changing nature and meanings of manual work, with an emphasis on two poles: *craftsmanship* and *precarious work*, which are used as 'ideal types'. It defines craftsmanship as 'an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (Sennett 2008, p. 9). It links craftsmanship with a sense of *vocation*, described as a practice that incorporates a personal dimension (the 'calling'), and a social, public facet (Hansen 1994; Billett 2011). Chapter 2 looks at several transformations in the world of work (notably *de-skilling*) that threaten the notion of craftsmanship as vocation and implicitly, people's sense of identity, pride and sociality.

Chapter 3 defines initial VET: the secondary education preparing young people for level 3 occupations. It describes three main approaches of organizing VET across Europe (cf. Wieland 2015): (i) the liberal, market-based model where the supply and demand of un-standardized training is given by the market (UK, Ireland); (ii) the school-based/bureaucratic/state-regulated model (France) and (iii) the dual-corporatist model, applied in German-speaking countries, which merges school-based regulations with market-based approaches. It is argued that the 'German dual model' receives high endorsement in Europe and in

Romania, as well (where the first initiatives of this kind started to emerge, mainly in Transylvania). The chapter includes background information on the socio-economic context of Romania and its VET project.

Chapter 4 presents the theoretical and practical rationales for carrying out the research and calls for the need to challenge the economistic base for policy making on VET. It argues that young people in VET by large, and those from Romania in particular, tend to have an 'invisible' research status in youth studies. The main research goals are articulated around the need to explore how young people in Romania's VET position themselves in relation with the work that is likely to be available in the near future. Lastly, several details on the qualitative methodology are being provided. The main findings are analysed in the following three chapters, broadly organized along three ideological layers that frame young people's high aspirations and low expectations.

Chapter 5 analyses young people's desire for identification through work and argues that those in VET feel strongly about enduring views of work to which they show a sense of entitlement. It draws on the finding that although the types of jobs that are available to young people are horizontal, they are actively searching for possible ways to work up an imagined occupational ladder: by an increased sense of respectability, and by building up clientele. The chapter shows that young people seem only vaguely aware that the occupational structure has changed and that employees can rarely start low and build up their trajectory to the top. The chapter links young people's expectations for work to deliver social validation, progression, a sense of stability and self-worth, to Sennett's notion of 'cultural anchors' (2006, p. 185). Ultimately, it analyses interviewees' disapproval of unemployment as a downside of the rhetoric of hard work and as an illustration of the 'ideological fortification of work in neoliberalism' (Frayne 2016; Tyler 2013; Edgell et al. 2016).

Chapter 6 examines a second discursive layer that goes beyond the 'ideal values' (the 'grand-narrative' in Chap. 5), to the 'real values' that are relevant in shaping the actual interactions in the world. It links young people's accounts (related to high aspirations, centrality of personal happiness, consumption and experimentation) with the broader neoliberal thinking. In this process, the analysis centres on what Potter and Louth named the micro-level 'production of neoliberal subjectivi-

ties' (2017). The chapter suggests that young people incorporate their fragile awareness that work becomes precarious, within a neoliberal rhetoric of choice and experimentation. They also tend to relate to their jobs—precarious as they may be—in a very deep, personal way and with an obvious (yet, class-bounded) search for 'happiness at work'. 'Having a job you really like' sits at the core of young people's aspirations. The chapter interprets this cross-cutting theme in Standing's terms: young people make a 'fetish of happiness' and, thus, help create the base for their own disillusionment.

It is argued that young people in VET—as well as probably their high school peers—inhabit a world where agency and a sense of personal freedom from others' constraining views are important drives. They position themselves as aspiring to a place 'high', despite a conforming pressure. Their accounts reflect a need for social mobility against the odds (yet within the constraining limits of class). That the locus of their occupational expectations is a precarious job seems to carry little relevance, as individual agency (at all expense) gains priority. Ultimately, the chapter advises that—despite the current policy thinking that links people with jobs—those in VET exhibit a (probably) similar tendency to experiment with options, choices and 'dreams' as their peers in high school.

Chapter 7 deals with young people's apprehension that expectations may prove volatile, if not erroneous and with their deep realization that the actual prospects likely to unfold are more constraining than enabling. It presents as 'low expectations' a rather deeply held, tacit, hard-to-unpack set of anxieties. One concern is related to their actual capacity to master the trade they are expected to learn and to the ethos of precarity embedded in their training placements. Migration is discussed as an instance of labour that is opportunistic ('taking what comes' cf. Standing 2011) and instrumental ('a way to pay the bills' cf. Koeber 2002). The chapter closes the triad, by confirming that young people have 'reasonable' personal/professional aspirations, yet they lack the enabling structural circumstances and the conceptual map (i.e. mentorship, guidance, friendly institutions) to achieve them. Ultimately, it comments on young people's low sense of control over their 'work destiny', on their weakened social awareness, poorly articulated political voice and a general sense of resentment.

# Implications of This Research

Depending who policy makers think of as stakeholders, they will design solutions. But they rarely think about young people. The rationale behind the book is that the role of research is to provide rich descriptions, able to shed light on policy-relevant issues, yet not to propose policy recommendations as such. Thus, this book's relationship with the EU and the Romanian policy making is more in terms of principles, broad ways of action and provision of qualitative findings that interrogate some of the current policy assumptions. The book does not aim to be an evaluation of the VET system in Romania, either. Ultimately, it hopes to live to the ambition of communicating to the broader scholarship on youth and to challenge the functionalist approach on employability and skills that overlooks young people's inner worlds.

The book remains close to its constructivist, youth-centred ethos. The research looked not being restricted to a normative, predefined notion of work within the *ideology of work* as a moral duty, or 'life's most noble calling' (Frayne 2016). It actively searched for instances that open up possibilities of reinterpretation and considered central to maintain the category of 'work' open, able to include unanticipated notions, likely to emerge during the fieldwork. Young people were encouraged to generate their own categories and views based on a non-judgemental research approach. It remained aware at the possibility that—important as it may be—work may not be central to young people's lives. Yet, in the final analysis, it emerged that young people display rather normative views about hard work and conventional family lives. They seem to rely on long-held notions of occupations as meaningful and relatively stable across the lifespan, albeit with an important focus on individual choice and trust in the 'perfect job match'.

As young people try to make sense of the tensions that go from aspirations to their sense of what is 'realistic', the book speaks about intricate dynamics of attribution, responsibility, (in)security and risk. It unfolds the ways young men and women relate to neoliberalism's *four Cs* of '*change*, *choice*, *chances*, and *competition*' (Phoenix 2004, p. 229). These processes of 'making sense' of complex issues such as work reflect how

broader, global dynamics like precarization, migration, consumption and commodification of education intersect long-held societal views about the role of education, young people and individual choice.

While unfolding young people's complex social worlds, this book connects with previous research that challenged narrow policy conceptualizations on 'employability', 'skills mismatch' or on 'labour market inclusion as social inclusion'. According to McGrath (2012), these discourses send a disempowering message on the perceived value of young people's lives. The book questions the reductionist notion of *skills for jobs*, by opening up a discussion on young people's subjectivities, aspirations and worldviews that go beyond social utility, as conceived in the mainstream policy approaches. In line with the argument of Foster and Spencer (2011), the book calls for revisiting crude notions of risk and resiliency and opts for a focus on the ways young people themselves narrate 'desirable futures': a 'more humane, and in many respects a more fruitful way of approaching the study of young lives' (2011, p. 125).

As this book suggests, VET is not only a 'work thing'. It calls for broadening the debate on youth exclusion, enlarging it from the overwhelming focus on employment, to a multidimensional approach able to reflect other transitions and aspirations young people may have (e.g. related to family life, leisure, consumption, friendship and civic life). Seeing work in isolation from the other life areas that matter to young people, severely limits our understanding of who young people in VET are and what they aim at. It substantiates some foundational statements telling that the moment labour market considerations receive priority over individual's growth, VET 'becomes inconsistent with democratic principles' (Thompson 1973, p. 95).

At the end of the day, the debate on VET is part of a broader current that goes beyond the actual situation of the young people gaining level 3 qualifications. The concern for *materiality* and the capacity *to do* things (rather than the capacity *to know* things) goes well beyond VET. It started to have effects in higher education where a culture focused on knowledge is given place to one that favours more tangible 'outcomes'. By signalling some of the shortcomings in the current discourses on VET, this book calls for a dispassionate and more balanced approach on educational policies. It builds up the argument that stating that VET is invariably good is

as partial and hazardous as stating that it is always a bad idea. We risk responding to a negative stereotype by turning to an overwhelming (and equally biased and unrealistic) positive stereotype. Or, as this book shows, young people come to discover how to add light and shade to the rhetoric.

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# Part I

**Manual Work, Vocations and the Creation of Working Subjects**

# 2

# The Changing Nature and Meanings of Manual Work

This chapter sets the scene for examining how the notion of vocation articulates itself with the prospects of precarious labour. In this process, it examines the changing nature and meanings of manual work, with an emphasis on two poles: craftsmanship and precarious work, which are used as 'ideal types'. The first part defines craftsmanship as 'an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (Sennett 2008, p. 9) and argues that a recent view on craftsmanship goes beyond artisanal work and embraces any area of human action. The chapter links craftsmanship with a sense of vocation and looks at several transformations in the world of work (notably de-skilling) that threaten people's sense of identity, pride and sociality. It discusses the emergence of *the Precariat*: a 'class in the making' characterized by distinctive relations of production (i.e. labour is insecure and unstable, casual, agency labour, part-time, phoney self-employment etc.), distribution (income insecurity), with distinctive relations with the state (fewer rights) and a 'modal consciousness' shaped by anxiety, alienation, anomie and anger (2016). (Standing 2014a, b, 2016). The chapter argues that precarious labour— by the lack of control over the work process, its sense of uncertainty and weakened personal and social identity—is incompatible with the notion of vocation. Lastly, it discusses the link between craftsmanship (as

vocation) and precarious work, with the suggestion that much previous research tended to imply a linear and mutually exclusive relationship.

## Craftsmanship in Crisis

In general, craftsmanship encapsulates the ethos of a bygone era, not without an occasional idealistic tone. Frequently, it describes the institution of medieval quilts where crafts were a form of social capital transferred from master to the apprentice (Frayling 2017). In Weber's protestant work ethic, craftsmanship was put to serve the idea of good Christianity. In a very crude sense of the term, craftsmanship denotes the 'frames of mind' (Vidal 2016) that characterized the period preceding the industrialization. The search for craftsmanship in an era of standardized mass production may, thus, be perceived as misdirected, if not anachronic or naive. Yet, the concept never disappeared. More recently, it became very useful in examining the way present-day transformations in the world of work intersect our sense of humanity. Richard Sennett and Sir Christopher Frayling were particularly influential in reviving the concept in ways that go beyond its medieval ethos, yet with awareness at the risk of romanticizing 'the balm of craftsmanship' (Sennett 2006, p. 105).

Initially, craftsmanship was a (male-biased) concept applied to manual, artisanal workers. However, its contemporary understanding extends much beyond and may encompass virtually any area of human action[1]: 'an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (Sennett 2008, p. 9). It involves self-discipline and self-criticism, depth, a voluntary pursuit of quality and, ultimately, care for a thing done well (Sennett 2006). Craftsmanship is, invariably, related to a sense of pride in one's inherent and acquired qualities (Sennett 2018). It involves our innate capacity for cooperation (Sennett 2012), continuous dialogue and stable 'bonds of mutuality' (Sennett 2018). It comes that craftsmanship cannot be instant or spontaneous; it needs depth and an environment

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[1] See Sennett's notion of 'mental craftsmanship' expressed, for instance, in the effort of writing clearly.

free from unanticipated tasks, from hectic demands (as opposed to the new focus on multitasking) and free from shifting priorities. Moreover, it involves intensive preoccupation and strong fixation on one thing ('obsession' according to Sennett 2006).

Craftsmanship inspires a sense of vocation, as it unites knowledge, experience, a capacity to act in the world for solving problems for communal benefit, a sense of belonging and talent. Vocation was described as a practice that incorporates a personal dimension—the 'calling', and a social, public facet (Hansen 1994; Billett 2011). Vocations are very personal. They speak about the sense of self, identity and personal fulfilment generated by work (Hansen 1994). Dewey (1916) questioned society's tendency to link vocation with certain occupations or professions of high standing. According to him, any work (paid or unpaid), regardless the type of knowledge required, can meet the characteristics of a vocation, provided it attaches a personal and social worth. Alternatively, a work done well, according to high standards of quality does not necessarily reflect a vocation, unless the person is committed to this work and appropriates it with enthusiasm (Wertsch 1993; Billett 2011). Vocations are also social, in the sense that the meaning of work goes beyond practitioners' own satisfaction and embraces community value. Yet, while society can merely shape one's vocation, it is only the individual who decides—freely—which is or is not his or her calling (Billett 2011).

Craftsmanship, as well, carries both personal and community implications. According to Sennett, the craftsman is 'the most dignified person we can become' (2008, p. 296). It generates and maintains a sense of belonging to a community, long-standing relationships of trust and pride in a thing done well. But its role goes beyond the individual alone, as 'what occurs in and to work has profound implications for what happens more generally in society' (Edgell et al. 2016, p. 66). Thus, craftsmanship has less obvious implications for the citizenry, as well (Zukin 2004). When modelling their understanding of democracy with craftsmanship reasoning, citizens engage in backward thinking: from consequence to cause, as craftsman do when trying to solve problems. In this way, people interrogate the way society works, why and what can be done. However, this approach gets lost when citizens act as consumers only. Unfortunately, as argued in Sennett (2006), the political climate of the new economy is

such that citizens have difficulty in thinking like craftsmen. For instance, workplace politics that discourage (and even penalizes) craftsmanship carry implications for citizenship, as well.

The critical look at the way industrial labour carries a de-humanizing and disempowering tone, is not new. Indeed, the early conceptualizations in the sociology of work looked at industrialization as potentially involving a denial of dignity (Hodgkiss 2016). The work of Marx, Weber and Durkheim was permeated by a concern for the way in which modern industry 'squeezed out humanity in its search for efficiency' (Strangleman 2016). Durkheim showed that the persistent drive towards economic efficiency leads to a situation of anomie (normlessness), while Weber argued that excessive bureaucratization and strict adherence to rules estranges employees (Hodgkiss 2016). Indeed, in his argument on work as fundamental to society and to the human identity, Marx distinguished between factory workers (compelled to discipline and anonymity) and craftsmen: 'In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him' (Marx 1967 [1976], p. 460).

Later, Green distinguished between *work* as 'an activity in which one finds identity, meaning, worth or sense of achievement' and a *job*: 'something someone does to make a living' (1968 cf. Billett 2011, p. 63). An entire literature explained how de-skilling built on the idea that industry requires fragmented tasks, with reduced skill level. Braverman (1974) was one of the first to examine the fractured labour processes as a consequence of capitalist drive for profit by control and surveillance over labour process. This approach was the result of the implementation of the scientific management techniques (see Taylorism) and of the use of technology for control.

For Sennett, de-skilling was part of the broader work politics of denying craftsmanship in the entire world of work. For instance, Kincheloe (1995 cited in Billett 2011) noted that managers within General Motors talked with excessive pride that there was no job in the automobiles manufacturing that would take more than 15 minutes to learn: 'The sacred goal of efficiency could be guaranteed by defining job tasks in such a way that any fool could perform. If workmanship and morale were poor, all managers had to do was to increase supervision and control' (Kincheloe

1995, p. 5 cf. Billett 2011). The potency of scientific management engendered a new way of relating to work: in the absence of self-expression and connection with the work process and final product, with decreased creativity, social engagement and satisfaction (Billett 2011).

De-skilling is not limited to industrial work, however. It is also part of the leisure and service sector where jobs tend to be deeply unsecure, alienating and impoverished (Winlow and Hall 2009; Silvennoinen and Nori 2017), to the extent that employees do not seek any emotional attachment or positive symbolism related to their work identity. By de-skilling, work became intellectually or emotionally unfulfilling and no more than a 'way to pay the bills' (Koeber 2002; Winlow and Hall 2009; 2013; McGrath 2012). In a dystrophic departure from the notion of work as socially meaningful, Ritzer equated the low-level, low-paid service worker with the *homo sacer* of the post-political order: disreputable, exploitable and untrustworthy (2004 cf. Winlow and Hall 2013).

There is a growing argument that both de-skilling and up-skilling (and many other processes in the same area) are part of the same broader context meant to infuse a sense of insecurity among workers occupying very different positions in the labour market (Winlow and Hall 2013; Heyes 2011). According to Sennett (2006), the whole sense of alarm on de-skilling, the fear of being made redundant, refer in fact only to the cutting-edge companies. Yet, they have the power to culturally frame the understanding of skills beyond their actual area, for the majority of workers employed in otherwise small local firms that preserve some continuity of skills. Besides, it seems that the skill shortages do not have the claimed scale (Keep and Mayhew 2010). The recent political call for 'more jobs' (yet, regardless their quality) does not give a satisfactory response to these troubling concerns (Winlow and Hall 2013; Roberts 2015). In an interesting twist, Keep and Mayhew argued that rather than hope that skills alone can help 'shift people up and out of bad jobs', it might make sense to reduce the number of bad jobs and make them less unpleasant (2010, p. 572).

Given the above structural changes, is manual work still meaningful for those practising it? For some, the founding theories that bonded work with social ordering significance are no longer tenable (Offe 1985; Strangleman 2016; Cleaver 2017; Savage 2015). According to

Offe, work ceased to be a 'key sociological category', as it is not objectively central in structuring life and because its subjective role changed, as well (1985, p. 129). He discusses, for instance, the changed nature and meaning of the service work, which departs from the established view of work as productive, easy to measure and linear. Work—he argues—is dissociated from other major areas of life, such as education, family life, leisure and consumption. For Beck, as well, the idea that social identity and status depend only on a person's occupation and career 'must be taken apart and abandoned, so that social esteem and security are really uncoupled from paid employment' (2000, p. 58). To Offe, a confirmation that society does perceive work as worthless seems to be the difficulty of the welfare state in converting unemployment into employment (1985, p. 144).

Still, if work may, indeed, be a 'disutility' (Offe 1985, p. 144), as argued in the critical theory, what else replaces it in the process of constructing social identity? According to one line of thinking, the symbols of consumer culture replace the weakened capacity of work to inform one's social positioning. In this realignment of priorities, the meaning of status itself is reconfigured: the social relations and group identities give place to individual features, such as money and reputation that work could provide. According to Eidlin, what matters is how income and status stemmed from individuals' occupations, shape behaviour *outside* the workplace, such as consumption and lifestyle (2016). For Bauman (1998), the substitution of work by consumption as a means to identity formation has dystopian implications: those who are economically excluded from consumption (the 'flawed consumers') are also deprived of identity. Yet, for others, despite capitalist tendency to reproduce 'the consumer as consumer', we cannot speak about the displacement of work, but rather about consumption acting as a form of domination, yet not separated from work (Cleaver 1989).

It may be, however that the changing workplace politics should not exclude the idea that 'good work' remains morally, spiritually and socially relevant. According to Winch, regardless of the actual opportunities the economies offer, people do need work that is fulfilling and meaningful (2000). Cort et al. argue that people at the base of the occupational pyramid maintain a high level of motivation, but which is disregarded and

discredited and to which the labour market does not attend to (2018). For Sennett the way economies actually deny people job security, emotional stability, a sense of belonging to a work-based community of identity are a new form of oppression (1998, 2011). Moreover, he argued that the new work arrangements lead to disorientation and emotional instability not only for the manual and service workers. According to him, high-tech companies as well undergo a deep schism, as people in the 'new professions' hold 'aspirations and actions' driven by the desire for craftsmanship, while the '"corporate" practice' ignores such aspirations (2018). To Frayling (2017), the state of assail comes from all sides by multitasking, flexible working arrangements, downgrading of dedication, short-termism, project work and alike.

The boundaries between good and bad work may, thus, call for interrogation. According to Eidlin, the orthodox divisions between owners and workers or between different strata of workers need to be replaced by the distinction between those still within stable employment (or state-provided benefits), and those outside it (2016). Beck calls this trend the 'Brazilianisation of work' in Western economies (2000), while Standing proposed the notion of 'the Precariat' as a 'class in the making', lacking for the time being, a common consciousness (2016). All the above debates have in common the search for a definition of what is good work. They move the understanding of work as related to individuals (as in the classical work theories), to a focus on the nature and quality of work (Edgell et al. 2016).

# The Emergence of Precarious Work

Generally, the long-held notion of employment as secure, with a sense of purpose and progression, based on commitment and achievement is disappearing (Sennett 2008, 2018; Sweet and Meiksins 2013). An economy based on stable work (in production) is increasingly shifting towards precarious work, often in the service sector. Against this background, Standing (2011, 2014a, b) analysed the notion of 'Precariat' which differs from the 'working poor' or the old proletariat in several ways. Its relations of production are insecure, instable, associated with casualization,

informalization, agency labour, part-time labour, bogus self-employment or crowd-labour.

Moreover, unlike the 'classic proletarian, who at best learned a craft or skill at an early age and if successful could rise from journeyman to artisan, to master craftsman or supervisor, *the Precariat* is expected to learn and relearn myriad tricks and develop social, emotional and communication skills that exceed anything demanded of the proletarian' (Standing 2014b, p. 2). Moreover, *the Precariat* must perform—as Standing phrased it—a high amount of 'work-for-labour' beside the paid hours of labour and within the paid hours, as well (2016, p. 120). This is, for instance, the time and effort put by a precarious worker for securing the workplace or for keeping oneself 'employable'.

Another defining feature of *the Precariat* refers to its' distinctive relations of distribution (Standing 2016). This means that members of *the Precariat* are more likely not to receive non-wage benefits or rights-based state benefits (e.g. holiday pay, sickness pay, maternity leave) that are common for 'the salariat' with secure, well-paid long-term employment. This further translates in distinctive relations with the state, and distinctive modal consciousness, as members of *the Precariat* have fewer and weaker civil, cultural, social, political and economic rights (Standing 2016).

Precarization of work takes place in a context of separation of ownership from management (the so-called 'disappearance of owners' cf. Smith 2016). The immediate supervisors belong to complex power structures, with the owners situated remotely from the actual work process. 'Who is and where is my boss' (Smith 2016) is a question employees can respond to very rarely. Weil (2014) included within the term 'fissured workplace' practices such as subcontracting, francizing or the temporal fragmentation of workforce via irregular and sometimes unpredictable schedules.

According to Standing, *the Precariat* is likely to develop the four As: anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger. Anxiety—the major characteristic of this group's condition—emerges out of frustration of having all the avenues advancing a meaningful life blocked. Members of *the Precariat* cannot develop the satisfaction and fulfilment known to others, through vocation. Their workplaces do not enable the construction of trusting relationships in meaningful structures or networks (Standing 2014a).

Thus, because of 'chronic insecurity', *the Precariat* cannot see their jobs as a route to identity, dignity and pride.

Alienation seems generated through the awareness that the job is being done 'for others' (also a characteristic of the proletariat), plus the 'feeling of being fooled' (Standing 2014a, p. 21). This later adagio comes from the puzzling message that members of *the Precariat* 'should be grateful and "happy" that they are in jobs and should be "positive"' (Standing 2014a, p. 21). Yet, they experience the so-called 'failed occupationality' (Bryceson 2010), defined as a strong sense of social disapproval, a profound lack of purpose and thus an 'ethical vacuum' (Standing 2014a).

Standing (2014a) argued that anomie is a 'feeling of passivity born of despair', that is, a lack of prospects and the realization that no escape to a better life is possible. The discourse on members of *the Precariat* as being lazy, directionless, undeserving and socially irresponsible maintains a sense of exclusion from the mainstream society. Therefore, *the Precariat* develops a mind-set characterized by stress, a feeling of being cheated for not having more and of losing what they have. Standing argues that members of *the Precariat* tend to be angry but 'usually passively so' as 'the precariatised mind is fed by fear and is motivated by fear' (Standing 2014a, p. 20).

It comes that precarious labour is incompatible with the notion of vocation. Given the personal and the social meaning of vocation, its opposite was considered not leisure, but absence of direction, 'aimlessness, capriciousness, the absence of cumulative achievement […] and idle display, parasitic dependence upon the others' (Dewey 1916, p. 307). We are, thus, on a safe theoretical ground when positioning vocation and craftsmanship as generic opposites of precarious labour.

Precarious work grew in an era of globalization, in which neoliberalism became a hegemonic ideology (Harvey 2005; Burrows 2013). It built on the idea that markets need to operate with as few impediments as possible and states have the mere role of creating the enabling preconditions (Gamble 2006; Robison 2006; Burrows 2013). The state endorsement of employment policies that disregard the quality of the jobs, the commodification of education for sole employment purposes and the process of attending to employers interests at the expense of other legitimate stakeholders are part of the neoliberal ideology. Processes such as race to the

bottom, labour market deregulation and flexibility have been attributed to neoliberalism (Standing 2011).

The notion that work is getting precarized tends to be obscured by the strong policy focus on job creation, skills and employability (which is still unclear as a concept cf. Atkins 2013). When the actual quality of employment and the problem of in-work poverty are being overlooked, social inclusion is equated with paid employment. Yet, the labour market is not the only setting where social integration occurs, as those excluded from employment are often integrated into something else (Levitas 1996). Critical theory argued that labour theory of value has become obsolete as work ceased to be the most fundamental form of social organization in modern capitalism (Offe 1985). Besides, there is a risk for skills policy to be used to close off considerations of other potential avenues for addressing social and economic problems, such as stronger social partnerships, more active economic development and redistributive policies (Keep and Mayhew 2010, pp. 565–6).

## The Relationship Between Craftsmanship and Precarious Work

The concepts 'craftsmanship' and 'precarious labour' are ideal types and instrumental when engaging in a discussion of the current transformations in the world of work. Previous research rarely associated the two concepts explicitly. Their relationship was assumed as mutually exclusive: craftsmanship as the opposite of precarious work, and precarious work as an implicit absence of craftsmanship. From a historical perspective, the gradual replacement of stable work with precarious labour may induce a linear view of their relationship, based on 'degrees' of precariousness, for instance. We wonder if, indeed, we depart from craftsmanship in a way leading invariably to precarious work, or there is much more going on. Ultimately, is the relationship between the two linear? If not, are there any alternative ways of articulating the rapport between the two?

Some analysts interrogate this divide, by engaging with the complexity of workplace situations that accommodate both. One example is,

according to Carrigan (2016), the growing craft micro-production role of barista as cultural producers that meaningfully express themselves through latte art, while occupying otherwise precarious work positions (de facto normalization of part-time, underpaid and overqualified labour). According to Farrugia et al. (2018), the work young people do today dissipates any 'meaningful distinction' between the person they are in general, the skills that they have and the actual practice of doing a job. They argue that the post-Fordist employment demands for new forms of labour in which 'workers are expected to make personal investments in their work and to mobilise their embodied subjectivities in the practice of labour' (2018, p. 272). Their examples come from the way young people doing bar work actively produce affective atmospheres, sensations of ease, pleasure and enjoyment that are offered to clientele. Importantly, the argument goes, such forms of affective labour are unrecognized within youth studies, a field overwhelmingly focused on youth transitions *through* employment.

Going back to our craftsmanship-precarity debate, we can state that on the one hand, young people working directly with clients, in services like the above express themselves through the work they are doing (arguably in line with the way craftsmanship involves the personhood). Yet, their very subjectivities are instruments, commodities in a changing labour market that produces, reinforces and ultimately demands 'youthfulness'.

While much research on precarious work built on earlier concerns with the Taylorization of work, some authors warn against the tendency to equate dull work on the assembly line with manual trades (Crawford 2009; Mason et al. 1994). Apparently, there are still instances of manual work that is intrinsically rewarding, meaningful and useful. According to Crawford (2009), the work of construction workers and mechanics, for instance, is secure, impossible to be outsourced and responds to real needs. He argues that unlike the tasks carried out on the conveyer belt, construction work connects those practising the trade with their (sic!) local communities and offers a sense of pride for doing a job well. Yet, whilst construction work cannot be truly outsourced, it may, nevertheless, be delegated to migrants, as it is often the case in Europe and the US; it can be without contract, in unsafe conditions or lacking adequate protection.

But often the debates on craftsmanship as vocation and precarious work have a problematic elitist touch. More sceptical voices claim that there is little evidence that craftsmanship has ever been more than the privilege of some. According to Cleaver (2017), in the history of capitalism, there was a limited number of skilled craftspersons for whom the 'work ethic' we now imagine did play a major role and who had a genuine desire to shape all their existence around their work. For Bauman, even nowadays, some work can indeed be meaningful and a major source of pride and self-esteem, yet be available only to the elites, whilst the poor are bound to work that is meaningless and degrading (1998).

Bauman's perspective was criticized for being judgemental and further discrediting manual work. For Billett (2011), it shows how elites articulate their views on the worth of others' work without empathy or understanding (2011). This spectrum of elitism calls for shifting the approach, in a way that starts the interrogation from the bottom-up: What do status and pride mean to those trained to become manual workers? What are the positive things they expect work to deliver? This approach remains open to the idea that manual work may be a source of pride and self-satisfaction, in unanticipated ways.

However, this shift is not without its predicaments, when not engaging critically with the delusion of emancipation or Marxian false consciousness. For Quicke, the current conception of work ethic and its idea of vocation as personal endeavour are part and parcel of the rise of capitalism (1999, cf. Billett 2011). That is, manual workers are deceived into believing their work (otherwise precarious) is worthwhile and part of their vocation, when in fact it serves the interest of the powerful elites (Bauman 1998; Quicke 1999 cf. Billett 2011). Eventually, one could argue that VET schools contribute to this system of governance, by instilling a distorted sense of worthiness through the language of vocation. There are obvious power implications when deciding what is and what is not meaningful work: by, with, for, or on behalf of those practising it (at the base of the occupational pyramid). At any case, the potentially misleading function of the idea of vocation may be too important to be left out from the analysis.

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# 3

## The VET Project

## What Is VET and Why Does It Matter?

VET has different meanings, and it is highly dependent on how vocations are defined. VET may go from the process of education and training provided to future teachers and engineers, as well as future plumbers and waiters/waitresses. Thus, it is not by chance that vocational education is by far 'the most heterogeneous of the main education and training sectors in Europe today' (Cedefop 2011, p. 5). Broadly, it was defined as the 'education and training which aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly in the labour market' (Cedefop 2014, p. 292, but also UNESCO, OECD, Eurostat). It covers a wide area of educational provisions: from being separate from both schooling and university provisions, to situations where VET schools/classes are included within high schools, albeit as a strand for those students who are not headed for university entrance (Billett 2011). Besides, VET may include technical university education, some adult learning programmes and much more (Greinhart 2005; Hanf 2002).

This book refers to *initial* vocational education and training (hereafter referred to as VET), which leads to level 3 qualifications. Usually, in Europe it involves young people between 15 and 18 years old. More than 40 years ago, it was argued that, as one of society's social institutions, vocational education 'simply reflects its dominant emphases' (Thompson 1973). It may well be that by examining VET today, we can learn more about our society and unfold a thought-provoking discussion about the priorities of our time and what they can tell about who we aim to be.

The literature describes roughly three approaches of organizing VET across Europe. According to Wieland (2015), one is the liberal, market-based model where the supply and demand of training are not standardized, but given by the market (UK, Ireland). It responds to the very short-term labour market needs and provides updated training, yet with a narrow, job-specific specialization, problematic sustainability and a weak focus on personal development. A second model is school based/bureaucratic/state regulated. In this case, VET is controlled and supported by the state, without the skills being necessarily a matter of labour market demand. France is a typical example. It has a strong focus on personal development, broad occupational competences, yet it is structurally unable to provide training that is updated, in line with the employment needs of the industry. The third approach is the dual-corporatist model, applied in German-speaking countries. It has many forms, but basically it merges school-based regulations with market-based approaches. School-based education is combined with apprenticeships in industry.

There is a wide agreement on VET capacity to ease the entry into jobs that are more stable and better paid, at the beginning of the working life (Eichhorst et al. 2015). It leads to broad occupational knowledge and a strong sense of belonging to a trade (Lehmann and Taylor 2015; Brockmann et al. 2008). Germany's dual system has been proposed as a 'model for other countries' (Euler 2013; Euler and Wieland 2015), intensely promoted and met with high policy recognition within the European Commission (EC 2012). Yet, due to the structural conditions it requires, research advises caution in promoting it irrespective of country-specific subsystems (Euler 2013; Euler and Wieland 2015; Lehmann and Taylor 2015; Billett 2011; Wiemann 2017; Wiemann and Fuchs 2018; Pilz 2017).

Despite its institutional differences, there are several elements that VET shares across different European countries. One is related to the continuous/irregular reform and a frequent 'state of crisis'. Indeed, due to its immediate connection to the labour market, VET is the educational area with highest exposure to change or to claims for change. Also, VET is characterized by the interference of different actors sometimes with weak understanding of the role of education and its mission, the nature of skills to be developed, or the way learning takes place. Thus, a common challenge is the difficulty to develop VET systems in ways that simultaneously resonate with the goals of young people and the needs of employers. Ultimately, VET tells a story of inferiority[1] in relation to academic, liberal education, which explains its long-standing (and for some sterile) search for a 'parity of esteem' (Andressen and Dalton 2017). Exceptions seem to be Germany and the Nordic countries where the vocational pathway is still regarded as a 'high status route into employment' (Cedefop 2008).

One explanation for the failure of promoting parity of esteem is the link with social inclusion, which further repudiates VET (Cort 2010). Others argue that the very search for parity of esteem is rather futile, unproductive and unable to bring the agenda of VET further. For Billett (2011), if the parity argument cannot be made, it is important for VET to be seen 'in its own terms and on its own bases as being worthy and worthwhile' (Billett 2011, p. ix). Still, this does not elude a major challenge: how to conceptualize the role for VET having in mind its social inclusion character (e.g. by engaging with young people who have been unsuccessful in general education), yet without undermining its main role: delivering work-related learning in a full range of levels of knowledge, skills and competences (Leney and Green 2005).

Or, positioning higher education as 'the' standard and the enduring search for parity *with* removes us from the possibility to see VET as a choice in its own right. See, for instance, the 2017 rhetoric statement of

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[1] There is high variance among countries in the level of status associated to VET. Besides, in the same country there are different levels of prestige associated to different VET schools, depending on the type of jobs they are conducting to. Yet, in general, our societies share a cultural divide between manual and intellectual work.

the Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen, in the opening of the European Vocational Skills Week, a very recent and influential initiative of the European Commission: 'In a smart working world, vocational education and training is a smart choice. The perception that VET is the "poor neighbour" of a university education is mistaken. It is not a poor neighbour, it's an equal!' (EC 2017a).

VET gained unprecedented policy momentum in Europe. Encouraging people to consider VET as first choice in their career path is one of the ten key actions proposed by the Commission under the New Skills Agenda for Europe, which has been rolled out since June 2016 (EC 2017a). Stakes are high and the language about VET does not save superlatives. The European Commission speaks about 'the crucial role of VET in supporting skills, jobs, innovation and competitiveness but also in terms of personal fulfilment' and argues that 'choosing VET can lead to attractive and challenging careers, and opens the door to opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling at high levels' (EC 2017a).

Although the recent European policies place a strong focus on choice and progression routes, should young people decide so, Romania's VET policy making hardly mentions it. As elsewhere, policy making starts from the presumption that certain groups (for Romania, notably the young people in rural areas and the Roma) are 'perpetually disaffected and uninterested in education' (Gerrard 2014). According to this view, these groups have a semi-skilled employment destiny, and the faster, the better.

The US has a different story to tell. Interestingly enough, it seems that the term 'vocational education' was first used in the US by Dewey (1916 cf. Billett 2011), in a major debate with David Snedden, the advocate of social efficiency and of occupationally focused provision of education. Snedden endorsed a divide between liberal and vocational education and favoured a school system that reproduced the social order, which was focused on productivity and 'social usefulness'. Dewey, on the contrary, argued for vocational education, yet, in a way that would encourage young people to be politically minded, creative and aware at the structures that oppress. He saw vocational education as part of a broad, emancipatory project of creating an 'industrial intelligence', at odds with

'vocational training' or 'industrial education'. In his view, vocational education should meet students' (not industry's) needs and aspirations, have personal and social value and not be driven by corporate interests. He warned against the democratic deficit (or even 'sacrifice of justice') in a society where public money is channelled into schools acting as 'preliminary factories' at the expense of key educational values (Dewey 1914, p. 11 cf. Kliebard 2004). Dewey proposed that the binary between manual work and intellect was a product of an economic condition built on social injustice. He advocated in favour of the 'acquisition of specialised skills based on science and knowledge of social problems and conditions and not the acquisition of specialised skills in the management of machines' (Dewey 1915 [1979], p. 42).

Despite Dewey losing the debate, still, the US did not embrace the apprenticeship model from Europe, mainly because of concerns about the capacities of American workplaces to support that model of learning (Gonon 2009 cf. Billett 2011). Instead, the community college system was trusted with vocational education, yet with a stronger focus on general education than the European apprenticeship model (Billett 2011). This made Ken Roberts state that 'America is arguably the most modern among modern societies, a status achieved by its willingness to jettison European traditions such as separate academic and vocational tracks through secondary education'(Roberts 2009, p. 197).

Despite the positive rhetoric, research indicates that many policy makers themselves do not seem to have positive views about VET either (McGrath 2012a). Years ago, VET was considered 'mother's last hope' (Malherbe 1977 cf. Powell 2014, p. 287), 'a place to park' young people believed to be dysfunctional (Wallenborn and Heyneman 2009 p. 412) or 'a great idea for other people's children' (Wolf 2002). At present, in the search for increasing the public (read: parents') 'appetite for VET', employers and policy makers look for positive metaphors, yet not always in a context that is fundamentally different from the one that generated the above critiques.

In general, VET is more expensive than academic education, as it requires small class size and needs constant updates of infrastructure, materials and content (Hagedorn 1999; McGrath 2012b). Limited funding and the weak dialogue between schools and entrepreneurs lead

to its isolation from the technological developments of the industry (Wallenborn and Heyneman 2009). The budgetary cuts and the competing priorities during the current crisis disproportionately affect school-based VET.

# VET in Romania

## The Past

Romania's modern VET dates back to mid-nineteenth century when schools preparing qualified workers were established in different provinces and a law on VET was passed. Before 1800, vocational education was associated to religious institutions and an established guild system in Transylvania. As this region was long part of Habsburg and, then, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it had an organized VET structure early on. After the Second World War, communism reshaped the industrial development and vocational education was instrumental in this process. The structure of the economy was such that VET became a tool for social mobility and rapid urbanization.

But communism also came with a powerful political strategy of discrediting liberal education, seen as a luxury and a privilege of the bourgeoisie. Physical work and a preoccupation with materiality became part of a political stance against the former intellectual elite. Communist Albania and Romania, each in their own way, were considered the countries adhering 'most ruthlessly' to programmes of 'social engineering' (Petmesidou and Papatheodorou 2006). For Romania, this referred to alteration of the rural culture and pressure for urbanization, harsh austerity, antiabortion policies, a reconfiguration of social hierarchies and political isolation.

In the 40 years of communism, the VET transformed and it would be a mistake to see the whole era as a monolithic 'system' only (West 2013). It changed from a relatively well-regarded and needed school trajectory in the early years of industrialization—see the respected status of the *meister* (rom. *maistru*), to a path for young people failing the route to upper secondary education. Despite the strong political value attached to the proletariat, during the 1980s, VET was far from a matter of prestige,

not even one of choice. Indeed, students ended up in VET after failing a major national examination in tenth grade.

At the time, VET had important characteristics of the dual system, notably strong partnerships between schools and the industry, mentorship and employment prospects. All VET schools were affiliated to an enterprise that helped equipping school workshops, provided work-based learning and further employment. Training placements were often protected from cost-benefit concerns or from strong production demands (with the exception of export production, the standards of quality in industry were rather poor). Horizontal job mobility was reduced and young people had legal obligation to accept (at least temporary) the employment offer of the enterprise providing training.

After 1989, instead of an expected quick economic recovery, transition involved considerable economic hardships (Hayo and Seifer 2003). The fall of centralized industry and the end of full employment lead to a severe decline in the quality of educational provision in VET, but also to high policy instability as a response. The Phare programming (1995–1998) had the purpose of 'revitalising Romanian VET with a cultural approach' (Nielsen and Le Steen Hansen 1999). Some major reforms were made: revision of qualification system, curricula and creation of institutional partnerships. A major component was based on piloting (support for 75 major schools), yet without further replication or scaling of interventions. The Phare TVET Programme continued between 2001–2003 and 2004–2006 with provision of support for 250 schools from rural and small urban areas. As the actual demand for VET from employers diminished severely, the rationales for maintaining the system as it was were problematic.

In the last decades, VET remained unable to meet its promise of employment and thus the trust in vocational education decreased. As elsewhere (see Handel 2005), in Romania as well, employers became so sceptical that they ceased to even expect schools to deliver other than low-qualified workers. Until 2006–2007, the availability of cheap unqualified labour force made the choice of employing extra workers more convenient for companies than investment in training.[2] Having a

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[2] Cf. Radu Merica, former president of the Romanian-German Chamber of Commerce, cited in media (Pantazi 2013).
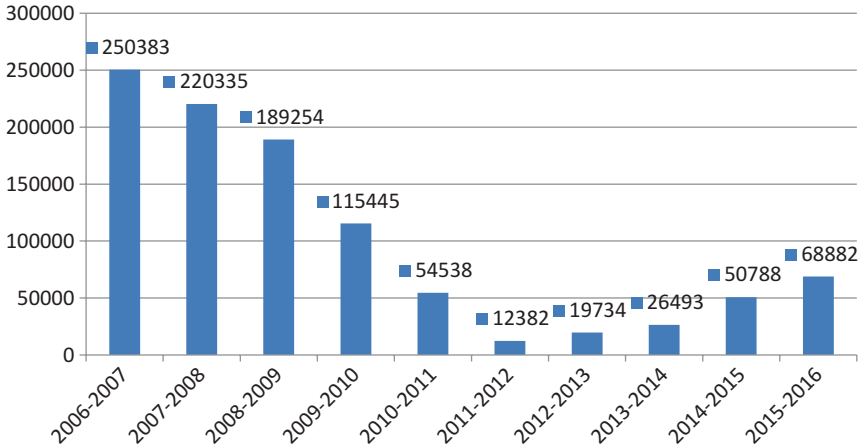
**Fig. 3.1** The number of pupils in Romania's VET (rom. *scoli profesionale*). (Source: Ministry of Education [rom. *Ministerul Educației Naționale și Cercetării Stiințifice*] and CNDIPT [rom. *Centrul Național de Dezvoltare a Învățământului Profesional și Tehnic*] (2016))

VET certificate did not appear to be a competitive advantage. It was only later, when the costs of production became an issue, that recruitment became more selective.

Part of Romania's 'disappointing economic performance during the transition period' was attributed to the inflexibility of VET (Musset 2014). At the begging of 2000, a policy of having progressive routes that go from level 1 to level 3 of qualification was short lived and followed by a *de facto* closing of vocational education between 2009 and 2011. From a total of 285,000 young people in VET in 1990, Romania dropped to 12,000 pupils in VET in 2011 (see Fig. 3.1). The political argument for this highly contested measure was that the labour market situation of the time made VET redundant. Shifting the young people from VET into academic education was paralleled by a 1.5% increase in school dropout from 2009 to 2011 (Ministry of Education 2015). In a context of demographic change,[3] the measure led to an ephemeral preservation of teaching load, albeit with consequences on educational quality and poor

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[3] The decrease in birth rate after the fall of communism started to have effects on the enrollment structure at secondary school level and add nuance to the difference in students' numbers.

labour market outcomes later on. Universities were considered the ultimate beneficiaries of the measure.

In the very last years, major socio-economic changes brought VET at the very middle of the public policy and economic concern. The context was shaped by demographic changes (several cohorts with VET qualification approached retirement or migrated) and industrial developments (automotive and textile off-shoring, the growth of the service sector). At the pressure of companies facing high employee turnover and a skills replacement crisis, VET re-entered as an option in 2014/2015 school year, yet, in a precipitated format, after young people had already attended one year of high school. Classes were restructured, mainly based on academic performance (or the lack thereof). One year later, a distinct three-year vocational track was proposed from the onset, to those finishing eight classes. This is the cohort the current research tapped into.

Against the above backdrop, young people included in the current research emerge as an interesting research group by the novel set of circumstances they experience. As the first cohort in VET after several years of *de facto* interruption, they act in the absence of any immediate role models among their peers. To add to complexity, they are subjected to the powerful policy rhetoric on the value of VET which, however, remains vaguely substantiated by prospects of 'good jobs'. Schools, on the other hand, are weakly able to equip young people with the capacity of moving competently within an industry. They operate under severe budgetary cuts and have to rely on local companies for training provision. The quality of the training process is highly influenced by the personal efforts and networks of the school staff and the objective characteristics of the local economy. There is a high variance among firms: from opportunistic use of trainee's labour, to dedicated personnel and space for the training provision. The personal efforts and networks of the school staff, as well as the objective characteristics of the local economy shape the quality of the training process. Ultimately, the long-term need for qualified employment of the type provided by VET is uncertain, despite the general agreement that an expansion of VET is needed.

## The Present

This book refers only to the initial VET which in Romania is full-time, school-based secondary education that prepares young people (aged

15–17) for level 3 occupations.[4] Education is mandatory until grade 10 (age 17). Upon completing the lower secondary education (*gymnasium*— grades 5–8, age 15), students take a national evaluation which is the main criterion for entry to upper secondary education[5] (four years of high school or three years of VET). High school education consists of several pathways: (i) theoretical (humanities and sciences); (ii) vocational[6] (military, theological, pedagogical, arts, sports); (iii) technological[7] (technical services and economics, environmental protection and natural resources).

Students enrolled in VET are accommodated in the same school unit[8] with their peers studying at the high school level (four years), in the so-called 'technological high schools' (fr. *lycées technologiques*). Technological high schools (largely in a similar field with VET) may have no more than three to five VET classes in total (rom. *școli profesionale*, the equivalent of the German *Berufsfachschule*). An average town has no more than two schools organizing VET (usually in a masculine and a feminized occupational area) and cities, around five. High school education leads to level 4 qualifications and finishes with a *baccalaureate* examination. Students in VET have some progression routes to high school. In general, technological high schools have the lowest, at times a concerning 10% *baccalaureate*, success rate.[9] A minimum score of 6 (on a scale of 1–10) is the entry criteria for university. With very few exceptions (notably, medicine), tertiary education is not very competitive and the majority of places are tuition-free.

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[4] The dual model in VET is rare and a special case. The text will indicate when reference is made to the dual system and not to the school-based VET.

[5] A 2011 project of moving the national examination at the end of grade 9, when mandatory education ends, was unsuccessful due to major resistances from teachers' trade unions and from the political leadership of the time.

[6] One can notice how the educational norms associate the notion of 'vocation' with 'middle class' occupations and, implicitly, denies it to those occupying the lower segments of the occupational structure.

[7] In a very rigorous sense of the term, technological high schools are also part of initial VET. They lead to level 4 qualifications sometimes in very similar occupations, yet with fewer time allocated to practice. Technological high schools provide a direct route to university and enjoy a different social status than the so-called '*școli profesionale*'. However, the book is not covering this area. The term 'VET' will be exclusively used with reference to the initial VET leading to level 3 qualifications.

[8] There is a single VET school that operates independently, without any high school classes. It is a dual school.

[9] In 2017, for instance, the pass rate had a national average of 72.9% (a recent record, however).

The number of places allocated for VET started to grow considerably, and further increases are foreseen. Each year, secondary schools (technological high school and VET) are allocated classes that need to be filled. VET schools compete among each other (and with high schools) in a market-like understanding. The hunt for students has started. For the most established liberal high schools, recruitment is not yet a survival issue of the kind it is for technological high schools and especially for VET. School principals and teachers, who are sometimes accompanied by potential employers, promote the VET 'offer' to potential applicants, mostly in the country side of proximity. It is not rare for VET teachers to know students personally before applying to VET. At stake are teaching norms and, sometimes, the institutional survival. There are rarely two schools offering the same qualifications, and the selection pool rarely goes beyond the region that is normally within school's individual realm of influence.

The admittance standards are very low in VET. As a matter of fact, with the exception of the dual system, only 2 out of the 34 schools visited had more applicants than places. The struggle for institutional survival continues with a sometimes difficult process of *maintaining* students in VET. Given the occupation-specific curricula, later transfer across VET areas is close to impossible.[10] Very low school performance is tolerated provided there are no major misconduct problems. Numbers matter.

More young people in VET means a larger selection pool of skilled workers (Billett 2011). Whilst for various reasons there is now a workforce replacement crisis in parts of Europe and beyond, it is not certain how far the imperatives for 'more VET' will go and also what happens with the people who receive the training yet face no employment options commensurate to their qualifications. For the time being, the rise of neoliberalism coincides with the removal of state support from workers towards improving the terrain for employers (Harvey 2005).

In the cities with higher economic growth, there are dual schools supported by major companies, mainly in the automotive technology. This practice is likely to be extended, yet, for the time being, the

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[10] This research identified very few instances of transfers in VET, mostly for young people in foster care, who experienced relocation.

majority of VET schools do not operate within a dual system. The conventional arrangement involves an average of 40% of the curricula allocated to theory and 60% to practice (in school workshops and/or at local firms). In the ninth grade, the practice is carried out on school premises (sometimes very old and ill-equipped). In the 10th and the 11th grade, all VET students are supposed to have weekly two to three days of practice in a company and also some longer periods of practice each semester. In general, schools secure placements for their students.

There is, however, an uneven quality in the provision of work-based training, highly dependent on the availability of local companies. At one end, there is the situation of young people having almost exclusively school-based training (with outdated equipment and personnel without exposure to recent technology) or some unstructured, observations in a work setting. At the other end, there are very robust placements in companies' training centres where the learning process is very structured, based on gradual introduction into work and exposure to recent developments in the industry.

The fields of VET are rather conventional and generally aligned with what has long been the local practice: auto mechanics, constructions, welding, electronics, plumbing, textile work, butchery, bakery and cooking, carpentry, forestry and work in commerce. The curriculum is rarely very recent. There are no VET schools in the novel areas such as renewable energy; greening of VET has not reached the Romanian system. The choice for learning is often driven by the available infrastructure, donations or spared materials from local companies (a perfect case of trading educational autonomy for supplies, according to Hagedorn 1999). VET schools often operate in the logic of institutional preservation (i.e. strong resistance in reconsidering the role of tenured staff and poor funding for infrastructure). Thus, it does not come as a surprise that often young people receive VET qualifications that are not matched with the labour market: in areas the labour market cannot sustain or where there is some saturation.

The actual sites for VET (technological high schools) carry the legacy of a contested past. Some were built during the late communist period; the weak investment in education that followed was unable to refashion their rudimentary and impersonal appearance. Other schools date back to the interwar period of cultural effervescence and are now the sites of powerful real-estate interests (e.g. propriety claims by individual successors or

the church, as well as political arrangements for space renting and interference of private universities). Their survival as institutions is often problematic, as technical colleges[11] may need to manage demands for sustainability, the spectrum of evacuation, the unification with other schools, diminished investments, high staff turnover, frequent changes of leadership, political influences and pressures. A continuous state of instability, if not urgency, became habitual.

VET schools are situated within technical colleges and administered by local authorities. School principals are politically appointed by local school authorities that are themselves heavily politicized. It comes that the change in top political leadership (i.e. by national elections) has downward effects at school levels in very tangible ways. Periodically, a new managerial layer enters into force, with its own vision, interests and ability to stand for or to trade schools' interests for economic or political needs of the moment.

Like elsewhere (see Cort 2010), Romanian policy making on VET is not linear, but a bricolage of traditions, models, influences and responses to EU policy priorities. It is a product of its own history, but also a projection of broader aspirations, sprinkled with more contextual responses to prevailing discourses. At present, the system navigates an environment permeated by powerful influences: employers' demands for skilled workforce, governmental concerns with unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, European Commission strategies for improving the quality and labour market relevance of VET. At the public level, the media is supporting an invariable positive view on the dual model. However, successive changes and simultaneous agendas were all without the capacity to significantly increase VET attractiveness among young people, or the way of thinking about VET and its people.

In 2016, a large scale consultation process brought VET in the middle of the policy agenda. Whilst the initial interest was to make all VET dual, the consultation led to a realistic option of having a legal frame for the dual system, when the local economic climate allows. However, because of changing political leadership, the ambition to reform VET remained after completing the public consultation. The public interest in VET remained high and the media coverage on the rise. The year 2017 has

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[11] The school unit that accommodates a high school and VET schools is named 'technical college'. It belongs to the secondary education level.

been declared the 'year of VET' in Romania. An attitude that is supportive of practical, job-related skills is permeating the general public, media and policy. Now, hardly any day passes without news or articles on VET. As it has been the case elsewhere (see Powell 2014; Wolf 2002, 2011), the discourse on VET incorporates an unquestioned power dimension when constructed as a good choice for *others*. Yet, despite the programmatic drive to reshape its image, VET remains severely underfunded, often at the intersection of competing interests and loaded with a discrediting societal bias.

The recent policy changes in Romania offer the legal frame for carrying out VET within a dual model, yet very few companies established this type of partnerships with schools. Reasons are many and—for the time being—a list can be mere speculative. They range from an unstable fiscal environment, cost-benefit analyses and fears of poaching, to schools' own resistances and a general unattractiveness of VET for young people and parents. Uncertain elements are the actual capacity of large companies to make their ends meet with in-house training. The experience of the recent developments in Romania's dual VET shows that in time this model becomes increasingly selective and taps into the selection pool for high schools, rather than the one for school-based VET. The goal of the dual system is not to take regular VET students (semi-literate, as they may be) and to lead them up to some level of qualification. If dual schools do work with the rank and file VET students, this is because of the—temporary—lack of choice.

The number of dual schools is increasing. At present around 15% of all places are in dual schools[12], which are backed by companies' resources, including strong advertising capacity. A dilemma occurs in relation to the status of the young people who are functionally illiterate and who are likely to be screened out in a competitive dual system. Regular VET schools, on the other hand, are not in a position of being selective. However—removed from the updates from the industry as they are—it is questionable to what extent regular VET schools can meet their educational and social purposes or, on the contrary, help reproduce a new divide between dual and non-dual. The research uncovered a sense of

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[12] MEN and CNDIPT (2018) 'Total propuneri clasa a IX-a, învăţământ profesional zi pentru anul şcolar 2018–2019'. URL: http://www.tvet.ro/ http://www.alegetidrumul.ro/uploads/00_Total_propuneri_IP_ID_2018_2019.pdf

frustration experienced by schools, when—given the pressure for sustainability—they felt unable to compete on the emerging market of short-term training provision. The conditions were perceived to favour versatile private providers, seen as close to the networks of political influence. Besides, the capacity to adapt to the new demands of the industry was severely curtailed by the moral obligation towards their tenured personnel. Qualifications inconsistent with the market needs were sometimes obstinately maintained for such reasons.

On the other hand, the criticism related to the risk of the dual VET for not catering for the social inclusion purposes is not new. Elsewhere, it was argued that the dual system has a built-in selectivity and risk of exclusion, and that many youth people cannot pass companies' high selection standards for enrolling in VET after completing lower secondary school (Masdonati 2010) while many others leave VET without a professional qualification (Wieland 2015) or Masdonati (2010). Also, young people's own preferences may not be reflected in the offer of qualifications, that follows market calculus of opportunities (Wieland 2015). A more refined understanding of what social inclusion demands are posed on the VET system (including on a future dual model) in Romania is thus needed.

## The Changing Socio-Economic Context

The above-mentioned reforms come as a (late) reaction to major economic changes, in particular to the process of reindustrialization (outsourcing) taking place in many regions of Romania. In 2016, the country registered the highest economic growth in Europe,[13] at 4.9%, driven mainly by private consumption. In 2017, the real GDP growth accelerated with unemployment reaching its lowest levels since early 1990s and it is expected to remain low (EC 2017a, b). The biggest private employers in Romania are in the retail sector. Companies from oil extraction, auto production and telecommunication follow. The following are the occupations with the highest number of employees in Romania's private sec-

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[13] Yet with one of the biggest budget deficits in the EU.

tor, totalling 11.5% of the national labour contracts: retail and other commerce workers (245,000) truck drivers (128,000), unskilled workers in the garment industry (97,000), security agents (93,000) (PIAROM 2016). However, state (or state-owned) companies are still the biggest employers in Romania (the Romanian Post, the railway company, etc.). Importantly, however, is that the country is also experiencing an increase of the unqualified labour force and an overall growth of the industries with low added value (PIAROM 2016).

Romania is an increasingly important market for industry delocalization in clothing, footwear and automotive (Postelnicu and Dabija 2017). There is an high inflow of foreign direct investment in the production of transport equipment, vehicles and manufacturing products. The automotive industry, for instance, experiences an unprecedented expansion, with major economic players producing car components in Romania. At one end of the employment spectrum, for low-skilled manufacturing, large companies draw on workforce from previously untapped groups: long-term unemployed from rural areas or small towns, Roma and other marginalized people. This type of employment is based on short term, in-house company-specific (but not industry-specific) training, often via private employment agencies. On the long term, this cannot sustain higher added-value industries. At the other end, the increased outsourcing in industries with high added value lead to a critical skill gap at intermediate level. Several companies rely on overqualified personnel in order to cover technician positions (level 4).

The skill crisis at intermediate level is, first of all, a crisis of replacement, as many qualified workers are reaching retirement in an overall context of demographic decline. Also, a third of Romania's active population is abroad (the so-called 'skills drain'). With a total population of nearly 20 million and 3.4 million living abroad (over 17%), Romania is in the top 20 countries worldwide with the largest diaspora (UN 2016). Moreover, between 2000 and 2015, it lost annually by migration 7.3% of its total population which is, worldwide, the fastest-growing number of immigrants from a country not facing war (the first is Syria) (UN 2016). A simple calculation leads to the finding that each hour Romania's population decreases by migration with 9 people; daily 200 people leave. This creates high labour force deficits. Back home, almost a quarter of employees (1.3 millions)

earn the minimum net income of €250 (as of 2018). The salary differences between companies are often small, and high labour turnover is sometimes driven by objectively minor increases or benefits. The disproportionate share of employees' salaries (37% salaries vs 62% profits in comparison with the EU standards of 60% salaries and 40% profits) recently entered the public interest (Romanian Academy 2016, p. 375). Employers' reliance on non-EU migrants is still low, but with high potential to grow, while the debate on in-work poverty is minimal.

The skills crisis is visible in manufacturing, but also in the service sector, where migration of qualified staff is a major concern. Work in the hospitality sector is highly seasonal in Romania. It is also one of the sectors with high tax evasion and informal work. The retail sector grew as a major employer, yet, with the same problems related to payment, workload, schedule, overqualification and poor progression that have been reported in the literature. To add to complexity, a large rural unemployed population relies on subsistence agriculture and welfare support. Some villages and the Roma communities are isolated and their level of education low.

Against the backdrop of skills crisis, Romania also has a structural problem related to the capacity to develop skills. Vocational training in schools is often provided by personnel approaching retirement or with a remote understanding of the recent transformations in the industry. Unless very large and able to create specialized training centres, companies and local firms have a weak preoccupation with the training of their workforce, as for many years the labour force was rather cheap and employers afforded hiring more workers. Little wonder Romania has a tradition of very low company investment in training, legitimizing the conclusion that these expenditures are seen as an immediate cost, not as a longer-term investment (Leney and Green 2005). The country ranks the penultimate in EU-28 in the proportion of enterprises providing continuous vocational training (CVT) (25% against an EU-28 average of 66) and the last in Europe in terms of enterprise provision of CVT courses (Eurostat 2010). Concerns over labour poaching and high demands on production explain the uneven quality in the provision of work-based training. This makes investment in VET a typical example of a 'prisoner's dilemma': employers do not see high return on investment and rely on

low-wage employees for producing low-cost goods and services. The low-skill equilibrium thus generated renders any investment in VET a company risk (Finegold 1991 cf. Winch 2013).

Another explanation may be that a quarter of Romania's employers work for state or state-owned companies (ONRC 2016) that invest little in training, whilst from those working for multinational companies the majority are in retail or manufacturing where the training is often minimal. Indeed, it seems that the alertness at the fast depreciation of skills is legitimate at the cutting edge of the economy (high-tech global finance and new service firms), whilst most people have jobs that preserve a continuity of skills (Sennett 2004). Besides, for the small employers, the capacity to carry out in-house training is very limited by production demands or even by concerns with firm survival. Large companies (including foreign and multinational) provided brief in-house training for the unqualified entrants and, more rarely, industry-specific training to the qualified staff. Nevertheless, large labour market sectors rely extensively on commuting low-qualified workers (rural sourcing), without high demand for middle-skilled workers.

Yet, some foreign companies operating in Romania have an organizational culture that includes an image of stability and employee retention. Involvement in dual VET is an expression of this ethos. It is certain that for the moment, dual VET responds to a pressing (replacement) need for qualified workers. Yet, it is unclear how much the dual system is expected to grow, whilst maintaining quality and the labour market relevance.

A concern in highly industrialized countries is 'technological unemployment', that is, the process whereby tech advancement endangers jobs. Indeed, some industries with high degree of automation (such as automobile, plane components and high tech) grow fast in Romania. For the moment, however, the availability of low-qualified workers attracted companies and parts of the production chain that are relying on human labour force. Despite being intuitively provocative, the idea that technology can lead to unemployment is only partially substantiated for Romania's near future. One should not exclude, however, that at some point during the occupational trajectories of young people now in VET, the increased use of robots will endanger their employment. As VET is

situated at the intersection of many roads, it can speak about the transformations in the nature and the meaning of work, about young people's sense of self, about the potency of migration in informing what goes on 'at home', about how a unique economic legacy intersects broader processes of EU policy making.

Romania is an interesting locus for research as the country is going through unprecedented transformations that are able to add nuance to the current understanding of work. After the fall of the centralized industry, unemployment became a major concern. At present, however, the country hosts a large number of relocated manufacturing companies. Unemployment is a regional issue,[14] while precarious labour and in-work poverty became tacit concerns. As of 2016, Romania had 17.4% of people aged 15–24 years in NEET situations (Eurostat 2017). To add to complexity, repatriation of some, simultaneous with the migration of many, reshape the way people think about work and about the choices they have. Roughly, in a third of Romania's 40 counties, employees amount to less than a quarter of their entire population. The situation can be attributed not only to demographic aging, migration, low-skilled rural and Roma groups, but also to the low salaries that make the welfare benefits a rational choice to many.

The overwhelming majority of jobs available offer the minimum income and chances are that they remain unfilled for long. Increasingly, economic agents report that they decide not to extend developments because of major recruitment difficulties. Media reports that employers face major difficulties not only in finding qualified workers, but also in recruiting unqualified persons willing to undertake on-the-job training and to accept a low salary 'for a period' (Brandl 2017). Large companies and investors advocate for legislation changes in favour of foreign employment. At present, for a non-EU worker, employers have to pay at least the average national salary (not the minimum income, as stipulated for the EU citizens). Against this context, debates about welfare

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[14] There are high regional disparities: from major labour force shortages in the North and the West, to high unemployment in the East and the South.

dependency rank high in the political arena and are actively fuelled by media.

As this research will suggest, for the young men and women in VET, localism is a powerful force in shaping the imagination about possibilities that are open. As it seems to be the case elsewhere, the aspirations/expectations are framed through the industrial legacy of their geographically and historically shaped class and gender codes (Ward 2015). However, it is simultaneously simple and difficult to position young people in VET in terms of class. For sure, they inhabit—as this research will unfold—a stratum experiencing disadvantage and social injustice.[15] They seem well aware at their positioning lower down the social pyramid (yet, not at its very bottom).

But references to *working class* or to *lumpenproletariat* would not be adequate, however. As the book will suggest, young people internalize the idea of an 'employment destiny', whilst having the intergenerational links with the sphere of working class broken. The labour market transformations of the last decade (migration, precarious work, reliance on subsistence agriculture) troubled their parents' relationship with work *as* employment (that is secure, stable and with a sense of identity). For sure, their grandparents had class consciousness, but one cannot just advance the same idea in regard to their parents.

Besides, unlike other countries, notably the UK, with a consolidated class consciousness, Romania has a more intricate relation with the concept. Historically, the country witnessed many reconfigurations of social positioning: from the abrupt privilege of those close to political leadership (during communism and also at present), to a politics of discretization (and oppression during communism) of the intellectual elite. Social inequalities deepened in the last years, with the richest 20% of the population having an income over eight times higher than that of the poorest 20% (EC 2017b). These inequalities are driven to a large extent by unequal access to healthcare, education, services and the labour market (EC 2017b). Ultimately, discrepancies between the economic/political and cultural elites render the concept of class hardly operational. It may

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[15] The book will prefer these concepts, whilst acknowledging their proximity to policy processes than to sociology.

well be that other categories (probably linked to political networks of influence) may work as pertinent social descriptors.

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# 4

# Research Puzzle and Methodology

While the nature of work undergoes intense change, young people's expectations from their (working) lives might change as well. Closer to the core of these transformations, VET may articulate itself differently than generally assumed. The economic conditions that created VET in Romania (and, probably, elsewhere) are no longer present. Yet, the expectations from young people remained largely unaffected. Policy making assumes young people in VET learn a trade to which they have a sense of attachment, which is *vocational*. However, we know little about their views on their (working) lives, on their education and the ways both are articulated with a possible sense of vocation (or the absence thereof).

## Young People in Romania's VET as a Case of 'Missing Middle'

Steven Roberts argued that youth studies have a tendency to focus on either the 'spectacular'/problematic or 'successful' stories of young people's transitions to adulthood and, thus, to overlook the 'missing middle' (2015). More recently, new groups of 'missing middle' claim legitimacy

(Cairns et al. 2014 on university graduates). This book responded to earlier calls to focus on the ordinary and the unspectacular in order to develop a more holistic picture of the challenges facing young people today (Roberts 2015).

The book tells a Romanian story and inevitably takes on the task of engaging with several core-periphery issues. It seeks to address a limitation of the way scholarship on young people in Romania reached an international audience. Often, the interest in the country was synonymous with what S. Roberts called 'the spectacular': the children in care during the 1990s, the Roma or those 'left behind' during migration. Yet, this exclusive interest in out-of-the-ordinary situations or groups, while legitimate, confirmed Ken Roberts' earlier idea that youth studies are in a permanent state of crisis (2009).

This book cannot promise to alleviate the sense of urgency Roberts cautioned about. However, what it does differently is that it does not start from the assumption that young people in VET are inherently in a state of crisis, in the sense that became common for other groups (e.g. the Roma, young people in NEET situations and those leaving care). Young people of this book meet the characteristics of S. Roberts' 'missing middle': they are likely to have 'ordinary working lives'; are neither 'spectacular', nor problematic or 'successful' and generally falling in between categories that attract high public attention. Chances are they will be employed; yet, this does not exempt a whole range of problems that call for research interest and policy action.

If we extend the metaphor, Romania can be seen as part of the 'missing middle', as well: 'not completely Western', yet not 'exotic' enough to attract by default interest (Cărtărescu 2017). On the one hand, being young in Romania is similar in many ways with being young in Western countries. Many young people have aspirations for higher education and mobility, enjoy similar consumption patterns, lifestyles and media cultures among others. On the other hand, the Romanian society is different in several important ways. There are high cultural and economic discrepancies between regions (south and south-east in comparison with north and west) and between urban and rural areas. At one extreme are the large cities with a vibrant life, whilst at the other end there are remote rural areas without modern infrastructure and a shared sense of deprivation.

Romania is home to a large Roma population with very low education and work prospects. With the share of early leavers from education and training[1] at 18.5%, Romania is one of the top EU countries by school dropout and also one of the very few where the percentage increased from 2011 to 2016 (Eurostat 2017). VET schools have a high student intake from rural areas and small towns.

Romania's visibility in the international research on youth is low. Ken Roberts' book *Youth in Transition: In Eastern Europe and the West* is almost a decade old and informed by fieldwork dating years back. As different countries in Eastern Europe follow different social and economic routes, it is important to overcome a view that overgeneralizes or collates de-contextualized processes. The book tries to bring a social group of Europe, from the margins, closer to the youth studies scholarship and also to refresh the understanding of Romania as a post-communist country *tout court*. In doing so, it engages with (and hopefully contributes to) the broader theoretical debates on VET, on work and on young people in Europe.

## Younger than 20: The Construction of 'Working Subjects'

The conventional ways of monitoring the situation of young people during the years immediately following leaving school have major shortcomings. According to Maguire and Maguire, the statistical data collection focused on 'patterns of destinations' fails to convey any depth of understanding about 'young people's experiences *between* destinations, some of which may only loosely be termed progression' (1997, pp. 36–37). Over 20 years ago, the authors called for 'longitudinal profiles' of individuals from a variety of first destinations. Statistical research started to aggregate data of this type. Yet, we miss qualitative insights on how young people interpret these processes, the ways they try to make sense of imagined possibilities and limitations 'in between destinations'.

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[1] Essentially, persons aged 18–24 with at most lower secondary *education* reported to the general population of the same age.

The available research indicates that those younger than 20 face 'severe difficulties' in getting quality employment in countries as diverse as England and Japan (Furlong et al. 2012). Labour market entries have always been more difficult (and, arguably, precarious) for the young people. A characteristic of the current environment is, however, related to people's weakened capacity to escape the initial precarious status throughout their working lives (Standing 2016). Against this backdrop, Standing coined the term 'precariatisation' to describe the 'habituation of expecting a life of unstable labour and unstable living' (2014), while Winlow and Hall spoke about the 'normalisation of workplace insecurity' (2013, p. 107). According to them, it is becoming obvious that we are now witnessing a situation of competition for jobs that workers 'in fact do not want', with increased support for the idea that 'a circular conveyor belt carries many of those on benefits into the worst jobs and then back to benefits again' (Winlow and Hall 2013, p. 107).

Especially for the young people in VET, it was suggested that 'the rhetoric of "opportunity" is "merely smoke and mirrors, a massive deception whereby young people are channeled into the low-pay, low-skill work market in readiness to fulfill economic demands for cheap labour as and when it is needed"' (Atkins 2010, p. 253). Besides, as participation in education beyond the age of 18 is increasingly expected for those who hope to enter secure and rewarding careers, the dangers faced by those who are left behind are likely to increase (Furlong et al. 2012).

The above changes and emerging trends are likely to influence the occupational trajectories of those now in Romania's VET. Permanent, full-time employment is increasingly not the norm at the base of the occupational hierarchy in Romania. The externalization of risks by temporary placement firms and other third-party arrangements is on the rise in manufacturing industry and in services. There is also an increase in solo-self-employment as de facto precarious employment. There are no strong reasons to believe that the situation of young people in Romania's VET will look anything other than very fragile in the near future. Chances are that soon many young people now in Romania's VET will have precarious jobs that bear the risks transferred from employers.

As elsewhere, in Romania the tendency of expanding VET gains momentum and economistic advantages gain political backing. There

seems to be no policy context where a cogent argument is made for *fewer* (and not for *more*) young people in VET. Still, one cannot go without noticing that young people continue to be engaged in a process that is critically underresearched (in Romania), or with growing evidence on its inadequacy elsewhere (see McGrath 2012 and Powell 2015 about the UK and the developing world). Besides, systematically, young people are missing from the table where decisions on VET are being made. Yet, we cannot proceed with a diagnosis of VET in the absence of a qualitative inquiry into what young people themselves see as important to them. When considering standards against which VET should be accountable, young people's views need to be there. Based on this understanding, this book will use a bottom-up approach on work, grounded in young people's perspectives.

This research took place in a social context that was trying to make sense of VET and to negotiate it in an unprecedented economic and policy context (a process of reindustrialization, economic growth and strong policy pressure for increasing the number of young people in VET, as well as a consultation process for VET reform. The research embraced the rare opportunity of interviewing a substantial number of those in the first cohort graduating VET. Given the de facto absence of VET for several years, the large majority of those in VET do not know anyone who completed the educational track they follow; they know little about VET and have rare models in the peer group.

The book explores how young people in Romania's VET position themselves in relation to the work that is likely to be available in the near future. It 'tests' whether (and how) the recent anxieties about the changing nature of work reached young people. In doing this, it asks young people what they value and unpacks the role of work together with the possible sources informing young people's perspectives. It gives young people a voice in defining what matters to them and examines the place of work in this construction through the lens of *precarity* versus *craftsmanship* research. *What types of subjectivities are generated in the process by which young people try to make sense of their future lives? To what extent do young people in VET see the future work as a base for identity, or, what are the other ingredients that help build a sense of self-worth? Ultimately, is the concept of 'vocation' still able to convey young people's imagined relationship(s) with the world of work?*

Previous studies on VET have been structural and privileged the economic and institutional rationales, as well as the views of the elites in defining the role(s) of VET (Powell 2012; Billett 2011). With few exceptions (Hochschild 2012; Hochschild and Ehrenreich 2003; Simpson et al. 2014; Hamilton et al. 2017), the research interest with identity issues was related to professions and less to occupations. The work of those with 'practical interests' was stripped of ethical value (Carr 1999; Blake et al. 1998, p. 164). When white working-class young people's processes of 'meaning-making' and 'identity work' entered research, the focus on work was secondary to issues like disengagement with education and young men's (sub)cultures (Williamson 2004; Stahl 2014). Only in the recent years, issues like dignity at work for those at the base of the occupational pyramid entered as a research topic (Hodgkiss 2016).

This book contributes to the process of revitalizing the debates on identity issues of manual workers, by exploring the views and expectations of those likely to enter manual occupations. Moreover, it incorporates the generational dimension into analysis in a way that is also aware at *intra*generational divides (as called for in S. Roberts 2015). Ultimately, the book carries ethical implications close to restoration of voice, as young people in VET meet the profile of a subordinate class deprived of its 'political tongue' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 461), without enabling circumstances to make explicit its normative convictions (Hodgkiss 2016; Mann 1973). The hope is that young people's 'personal epistemologies' (Billett 2011, p. 222) can refresh the understanding of the extent work is able to communicate meaning and status at the base of the occupational pyramid.

## In the Field

The research aimed to reach the voices of marginalized young people in ways that unpack the multiple secondary layers added by policy, media or other adultocratic discourses. In this process, it valued non-directive inquiries and deliberately searched to interrogate the mainstream assumptions related to VET. This is, very much, in line with the Grounded

Theory approach, which calls for an inductive process of building up theories, based on constant comparison and successive coding of data. But the Grounded Theory manuals also advise that the main question to be asked by using this approach is: 'What are the problems people have and how do they try to solve them?' (Strauss and Corbin 1998). While this research found several Grounded Theory principles of value, it acknowledges, however, the limitations of using it in the current research. The choice was to borrow elements from a constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz 2006; Mills et al. 2006) which simultaneously acknowledges the existence of an empirical world to be discovered and the multiple perspectives of those constructing it in the research process: participants and researchers themselves.

Besides, Grounded Theory is a creative process appropriate for topics when there is a lack of knowledge or theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This is far from the case, as young people in VET are not a socially remote or an 'exotic' group. Moreover, along with Burawoy (2014), we recognize the influence of theory in choosing the focus, in entering the dialogue with informants and in linking the social processes actually observed, with the broader social processes (Silian unpublished). Consequently, in line with the Manchester School we see the limitations (and the hypocrisy) of relying exclusively on inductive empirical tools and successive comparison, for the topic of concern. The intention is, thus, not to 'discover' grounded theory, but to engage with (and hopefully to contribute at) the 'already-existing theory' (Burawoy 2017). The 'already-existing theory' the book engages with is the burgeoning literature on precarious work and craftsmanship.

Methodologically, the book is based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with over 250 young people (16–20 years old, with a mean and mode of 17) from 34 VET schools from five (out of eight) developmental regions of Romania. The overwhelming majority of schools were located in Transylvania, a historical province that has a higher economic development. For instance, four out of the first five counties with increases in the number of new jobs between 2011 and 2017 are in Transylvania. Although the research included data collection from a county at the bottom of the economic development, as well, it does not claim statistical representativeness.

Overall, there were 84 interviews and focus groups with young people (96 young people were interviewed individually or in pairs). The inclusion of girls in the research was deliberate and proactive, as we wanted to go beyond the three Ms: male, manual, manufacturing workers (Warhurst 2013) that often sit at the core of Sociology of work. Yet, overall, girls amounted to a mere third of all young people in Romania's VET, and this proportion was further reflected in this research as well.

As young people's world views are located and/or produced in complex social and policy contexts, the team carried out over 50 interviews with teachers and local school authorities and 40 interviews with potential employers (company managers and human resource personnel). This book prioritizes young people's voices and, thus, reliance on the interviews with adults is minimal. The research overlapped with a major consultative process on VET reform. The team took part in the process, which involved analysis of policy documents, interviews and participation in meetings with decision-makers at national level. With very few exceptions, all interviews were recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. All in all, the fieldwork led to around 2500 pages of transcriptions and field notes. NVivo10 facilitated the interpretation.

In many ways, this is an atypical research as it includes an immense data set for a qualitative study. Reaching and involving around 350 persons (young people, teachers, policy makers, employers etc.) was a complex, time-consuming and (at times) emotionally draining process. Data interpretation was based on successive comparison, memos and numerous annotations. The analysis generated over 1700 tree-nodes and subnodes. At the end of the day, an inevitable question was whether the research (from the data collection stage to the interpretation process), indeed, had to be that big in scale and deep in focus. According to most manuals, the disproportionate preference for depth with such a large data set was probably unwise, but hopefully worthwhile. A comforting feeling, however, is that if this research aims to live to the ambition of answering the troubling questions it advances, it needed to have this large scale. The book accounts for a great variety of VET areas, gender, rural/urban discrepancies and regional differences. When we factor in young people's weakened capacity of articulating their views, together with the process

of generating and 'testing' hypotheses in the process, the amount of data unfolding becomes justified.

Schools are institutions that embed different layers of power which made fieldwork a continuously negotiated relationship. Formal approval was secured from school authorities (county level), from school principals and from young people themselves. In each school, we searched to have an interview with the principal and staff members (including *maisters*) who were involved in VET. The majority of teachers seemed excited about the novel topic of research, whilst occasionally maintaining some level of reserve on the actual merits of a discussion about future and work with the young people in VET. Researchers' level of freedom in identifying potential respondents and in carrying out the interviews varied from unrestricted access and time, to (occasional) situations where the school personnel participated in the selection of students that were deemed more 'suitable' (probably more articulate or with a better 'work ethic'). With a single exception, no member of the school staff was in the same room when carrying out the interviews/focus groups.

Some of these limitations were anticipated and actively mitigated. The author was well aware at the intricate power dynamics that may surround school-based research. Interviews/focus groups were carried out mainly in classrooms or in meeting rooms that respected the privacy of the communication. The team tried to diminish from the inherent power dynamics of a school setting, by rearranging the chairs, sending a sense of informality and ensuring young people have the necessary information about the research in order to make an informed decision to take part and to express their views.

The fieldwork searched to start a conversation from what matters to young people. The approach was to launch non-directive questions, exploring, retrospectively, the circumstances before entering VET, the pros and cons of the VET field, imagined futures. The post-work theories were instrumental in framing the fieldwork in a way open to reposition the taken-for-granted centrality of work (especially when precarious). The research remained aware at the possibility that—important as it may be—work may not be central to young people's lives. Yet, as the book will present, it soon became evident that young people in VET internalized a strong normative belief in their 'employment destiny'. The overall

impression of the team was that young people resonated strongly with the novel idea of a research with and about themselves and that, overall, they wanted their experiences to be told.

The book follows a constructivist approach. It is grounded in the understanding that young people in VET are *reflective*, not only *reactive* persons, able and willing to actively engage with the world, to draw experiences, to negotiate meaning and to create knowledge in this process. On the other hand, we are cognizant that the process of putting one's life together into narrative identities starts in late adolescence and continues throughout the life (McAdams 2011). Thus, a research with 16–17-year-olds, inherently, maintains some of the incongruences that are inherent to this type of 'work in progress'. Moreover, the research project reached young people whose voices are usually overlooked, if not dismissed, as incompetent or less legitimate. Functional illiteracy has high levels among the young people in VET and teachers agreed they are not a very articulate group. As their opportunities for debate on social issues were almost inexistent, participation in interviews/focus groups was often a provocative and deep exercise. Indeed, some considered it simultaneously 'interesting and tiring'. It might have well been the case that for many interviewees, this research was the first occasion for a more substantial reflection on 'who they are' and 'what they aim to do'.

The research process encouraged young people to generate their own interpretations, to raise their own questions and to make individual judgements. It prompted young people to engage in 'identity work' and actively search to build up a narrative of the self. Interviewers' decision was to cherish the imprecisions and the dilemmas young people encountered while trying to make sense of intricate situations. The main rationale behind was that 'much of modern social reality is illegible to the people trying to make sense of it' (Sennett 2004, pp. 11–12). Thus, the team was less concerned with how coherent the stories were, than with the effort young people put into making their experiences coherent. In line with the ethnographic approach described by Sennett, the team paid attention to what caused young people to contradict themselves or to arrive at a 'dead end in understanding' (Sennett 2004, p. 10). Thus, in interpreting young people's accounts, we incorporated the idea that contradictions are inherent. In order to better contextualize 'the findings' and

to increase reliability, the book includes rather large fragments from the interviews.

Interviews avoided questions on young people's family lives in order not to cause discomfort or a sense of intrusion. We knew there is a deeper sense of fragility than meets the eye. Questions on parents' work were addressed with prudence and general information on families' socio-economic status was provided by the interviewed school personnel in a non-individualized manner. For instance, in many schools, by the time of carrying out the interviews, the team already knew from teachers that 60–70% of young people in VET have a parent missing because of migration, separation or death. Situations of financial difficulties in commuting to school, parental long-term unemployment or precarious work were frequent. Importantly, the team noticed what seems to be an over-representation of the young people in foster care, some channelled in VET despite their stated interests.

There is definitely a lot in young people's lives at school and in the training placements that escapes the current analysis. By being restricted to the analysis of verbal accounts, the research is not able to explore young people's actual behaviours. Their social worlds beyond school, when commuting, consuming or engaging in leisure time, are also absent or accessed indirectly. Importantly, the research is not able to gain an unmediated understanding of parents' views on education and work. This—as well as teachers' and employers' views—would have enriched the analysis yet, while considerably extending its scope.

While trying to bridge the social remotedness from the young people in VET, the team was, nevertheless, aware at the potential influence that differences in class, education, ethnicity and gender had in data 'collection' and its analysis. The author had a previous record of research with vulnerable groups (the Roma, unemployed young people, working children) and high awareness at the social dynamics that maintain social disadvantage in Romania. Nevertheless, the book displays only some of the possible ways of interpreting the life circumstances of the young people in VET and should not be confused for the territory it tries to map. Ultimately, while doing the research, the author has to acknowledge being just another of the myriad of voices that are not strictly involved in VET, but yet claims a stake.

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# Part II

## Imagined Futures. On High Aspirations and Low Expectations

Policy often relies on under-defined terms when speaking about young people in VET. For instance, despite being overused in policy contexts, terms such as 'aspiration' and 'opportunity' remain undefined and not interrogated (Watts and Bridges 2006). It goes without saying that the notion of 'aspirations' is perceived as closer to the ethos of the young people with higher education. This leaves young people in VET to be defined by a deficit of aspirations (Atkins 2010; Rosvall et al. 2017) and further legitimizes the 'raising aspiration agenda' as a 'simple antidote to complex problems' (Stahl 2014, p. 91).

Part II explores young people's views about the future, their aspirations and anticipated possibilities, as well as the role of work in these imagined constructions. Trying to access what young people value about work is inherently difficult, as work carries a highly normative weight. During the fieldwork, it soon emerged that VET is far from being a one-way highway, that is, from learning a trade, to practising it. It emerged that young people's accounts about the future are non-linear: fractured, super-posed, disjoined or even incompatible. Their narratives on imagined (occupational) lives illustrate the inadequacy of interpreting qualitative data according to a statistical quest for individual typologies, as the same individual may display in the very same interview, different 'layers' of possibilities. Faced with an imaginary challenge of generating 'typologies

of young people in VET', this research would not have been able to provide any answers.

Instead of a concern for establishing individual typologies, this research distinguished between the 'unit of observation' (from whom/where data is gathered: that is, young people as individuals) and 'the unit of analysis/ the event' (identified within the narratives, based on the questions). In line with a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998), for our research, the unit of analysis was not the individual, but 'the event' (i.e. interviewees' 'views about the future'). Often, the same interviewee ('the unit of observation') displayed different perspectives on the future ('units of analysis').

It soon became obvious that young people's narratives did not coagulate around an internally consistent set of values/views. Instead, they incorporated rather different ideological layers which were put at work in sometimes incongruous accounts about future possibilities and limitations. Young people's narratives contained overlapping (if not irreconcilable) ideas. For instance, accounts on (long term) carefully planned courses of action were sometimes merged with reports on amalgamated, non-linear possible choices.

The next three chapters present the three major layers that seem to coagulate young people's disparate accounts on their imagined futures, as 'social facts' (Appadurai 1996). In a very general sense, the sections refer to values, defined as fundamental beliefs that are 'stable enough in order to encapsulate past and future aspirations and motives, selectively channel attitudes, perceptions and experience, and suggest appropriate behavior' (Bergman 1998, p. 86). We tried to develop a tentative structure able to account for at times incompatible values and attitudes young people displayed most often within the same interview.

The first layer captures several 'scripts or schemas' (Bergman 1998) that give young people a sense of meaning and facilitate interaction. They may be seen as part of a 'grand narrative' (Lyotard 1984): coherent, able to convey meaning. According to Bergman (1998, p. 86), this is the level of 'ideal values': not mere products of individual capacities to think and feel, but substantially moulded from young people's socialization history (i.e. family, reference group, the Zeitgeist, the immediate context and group memberships). They meet an 'impression management' function,

while projecting young people as competent interlocutors, anchored to strong conventional values.

The second layer goes beyond the ideal values, to the 'real values' that are relevant in shaping the actual interactions in the world. It responds to the distinction proposed in Bergman: for instance, while 'hard work for its own sake' might be a shared, yet ideal value, 'work for sufficient monetary compensation' emerges as a more salient and influential value in day-to-day work activity (1998).

A third layer brings closer young people's realization that their choices are structurally constrained. It is the level of necessity. It moves the focus from *aspirations* to the level of *expectations*, which contain the insights given by a deeper engagement with the idea that aspirations may not actually hold. In the economy of the interviews, the move from aspirations to expectations coincided with the move from a narrative within the logic 'if life was fair', to one about the actual possibilities of manoeuvre.

The three chapters on conventional values, on 'neoliberal values' and low expectations confirm earlier findings that people can easily hold attitudes that their values may not necessarily account for and that occasionally, values may be incompatible with each other, which may result in a loss of cultural or normative guidelines (Bergmann 1998, p. 87). They exemplify how values vary in salience, and may not at all correspond to a particular attitude (Bergmanm 1998, p. 87). By the simultaneous presence of incompatible attitudes, the three layers question the linear and mutually exclusive relationship between constitutive elements of craftsmanship (as vocation) and precarious work.

Ultimately, the ways young people propose and revise their aspirations reflect what Beckert recently proposed as 'the microfoundations of capitalism' (2016). He argued that 'in order to understand the amplitude and crises of capitalism, we ought to grasp the agency of actors, and not just the impact of great structural forces and tendencies' (Mica 2016, p. 115). He called for a departure from the conventional (yet, incomplete) idea that the expectations of conventional actors are rational or socially determined, because economic actors decide to engage in action in conditions of uncertainty (Mica 2016). In this process, they form 'fictional expectations' (Beckert 2013, 2016), which are subjected by different social constraints. Positioning young people as economic actors *tout court* is

limiting. Instead, the potency of 'fictional expectations' in shaping the 'microfoundations of capitalism' is a useful analytical tool.

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# 5

## The 'Grand Narrative': Or the Power of Conventional Aspirations

## The Belief in Hard Work

Interviews seem to suggest that young people have rather conventional life aspirations, linked to a stable job, independent housing and family formation. Paraphrasing Sennett (1998), we can say that, like the employees he interviewed, the young people in VET have a limited capacity to tolerate instability and fragmentation in their working lives despite the neoliberal rhetoric celebrating incessant change. This section discusses several cross-cutting themes revolving around enduring assumptions: that hard work pays off; that a hands-on, skilled trade is a good think; and that young people will have very few jobs across their lifespan. When entwined in social environments that are instable, it is not by chance that interviewed young people have very conventional aspirations and put equilibrium and predictability at the core. In a labour market that goes around celebrating flexibility, project work, externalization of risks by agency work and self-employment, young people's drive for security is a 'mental and emotional anchor' that is able to give a sense of narrative (Sennett 2006, p. 185).

Informed by post-work theories that challenged the idea that work sits at the centre of our lives as individuals and societies, this research tried to minimize the social desirability bias by awareness at the possibility that— important as it may be—work may not be central to young people's lives and there might be other issues and ways of expressing oneself in the world that carry importance. And there might be other ways of understanding work besides employability alone. Yet, as this section will demonstrate, young people's accounts confirm that narratives on work carry a strong moral load that reflect the 'normalization' of work as a primary source of income, rights and respect in our society (Frayne 2016). Overwhelmingly, interviewees spoke highly about hard work, stable employment and conventional lives. For the majority, having very few jobs was supposed to signal workplace loyalty and reliability:

I:         What do you think, Andrei? How many jobs do you estimate
           you could have until you retire?
Andrei:    Well, one if I like the job I have.
Cristi:    So if you have one job, one can see that you are a serious guy,
           otherwise…
I:         Ihi…
Cristi:    Otherwise…you work from one day to the next… (Focus group,
           grade 11, mechanics, large city)

Young peoples' imagined occupational futures seemed short term, diffused and with a presumed stability across the lifespan. Very rarely they took into consideration the de-capacitating effects of age, the draining consequences of physical work or the concerns from those already in work. Job quality went unnoticed: 'If you earn well, why on Earth to change the place?' said Ana, a 17-year-old girl in a class of commerce, with the intention to substantiate her colleagues' preference for a 'one and only' work place. However, in their city, there was a high turnover among retail workers and shop assistants who mostly worked for the minimum income, with all the common negative demands posed on such workplaces. Interviewee's exposure to these 'real life' circumstances and the imagination to learn from such experiences seemed very limited.

Almost none of the over 250 young people included in this research valued a trajectory capitalizing on different workplaces, able to signal

value and to increase the future employment prospects as 'alternative formula of value' (Sennett 2006, p. 129). Workplace mobility as an employ-ability tool, so much a concern for university graduates, did not seem to reach VET. Those from rural areas appeared especially worried by the prospects of chaining a workplace frequently. While changing the workplace may generally be an energy-consuming process, to them the emotional investment in this type of change seems draining, if not destabilizing:

| | |
|---|---|
| Virgil: | Well…many changes are a hard thing |
| Leo: | It's harder. |
| Virgil: | After you got used to a place, to go to another…again… |
| Leo: | You have to get used to it. |
| Virgil: | You have to start it all over again…. |
| Leo: | Yes. So, if you stay in one place, you're used to it, and you're doing just that. |
| Virgil: | It's simpler that way. I mean, it's better. |
| Leo: | Once you get used to a place….to go to another…you have to get acquainted with those guys as well…it's no use. (Virgil and Leo, grade 11, locksmithing class, rural area) |

Young people cherish the idea that hard work and persistence pay off. They tend to construct an image of a labour market that is fair, where it is possible to build up a trajectory of progress, where hard work and perseverance are rewarded. At times, the potency of this projection is such that the presence of tangible counterarguments is not able to shake its symbolic power. Here is an interview fragment where young people's expectation of stability and progression goes undisturbed by the troubling evidence that the promise may not hold:

| | |
|---|---|
| Teo: | A good job… in my opinion a good job would be first and foremost… to like your job and even if your pay is poor at the beginning… |
| Horatiu: | But now anywhere, a salary can be increased… |
| Teo: | Anywhere, as Horatiu says. For example, in the factory at X, you work for 8 hours; the first time they give you about |

10 millions[1] in hand, so to speak. Then, if they see you work hard and so, you get a pay rise to 12–13 millions.

I:          But they give you a pay rise? no deceive…

Teo:        You get the pay rise.

Horatiu:    For sure.

Teo:        Sometimes they can trick you.

Horatiu:    There are situations like this, of course. My brother got a job at [Company Y] and they told him time and again he will get a pay rise and he didn't. He got about 9 millions. That's what his boss said to him. Don't worry, you will get the rise … (Teo and Horatiu, grade 11, locksmithing class, rural area)

At times, however, young people learned to operate in a precarious labour market in ways that on the one hand satisfy their belief that hard work pays off and, on the other hand, reinforce the capitalist rhetoric that, with perseverance against the odds, one can make its way up to the top. Here is how a young girl and a boy in a textile class imagine a strategic way of navigating employment conditions in a company manufacturing automotive seating. The low salaries and the illusory compensating strategies made local media headlines, whilst the official opening of a new plant was perturbed by protesters. The company has an established system of in-house training that renders VET useful, yet not a necessity.

Young people's accounts are far from elucidating, as they question each other, come with confusing statements and end up in the impossibility of turning the system to their advantage. There are troubling indications of false consciousness in their struggle to capture the elusive rationales of work environments designed to motivate employers whilst maintaining very low salaries. Systematically, a local history of hard work and disproportionate earnings is instrumental in maintaining young people's belief in their capacity to control the terms of their work. Postponing gratification, a characteristic attributed to the protestant work ethic, is now incorporated in a process of building up a trajectory of compliance with a system whose underlying *modus operandi* remain unquestioned:

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[1] Approximately €200.

| I: | How would you like to be paid? According to the work norm? Or by fix salary? Or… |
| Margareta: | To have a fix salary. But with extra hours, to earn more. |
| Bogdan: | Well, why would you like to have a fixed salary? Because it will be the minimum on economy. You start very low…I don't know: 10 or 12 million, I think. So, you start from this point, you can make 10 seat covers or 200, it's the same. […] They may pay you in addition for the hours you do overtime; that is something else. |
| Margareta: | Yes. |
| Bogdan: | Because an extra hour is paid twice. Do you understand? They pay you extra, but if you have a fix salary, it doesn't help. It's useless to climb and get… |
| I: | You mean it's useless to work more? Or… |
| Bogdan: | No, I mean, it's useless to work there several years. |
| I: | So… |
| Bogdan: | Well, it's the same salary. |
| I: | Aha. |
| Bogdan: | Yes. But as time goes, you get a higher salary. |
| I: | Higher. |
| Bogdan: | So I have a friend, who's 23. So when he first worked he took 9 and 10 million Lei.[2] Well, now he reached 20–23 million per month. |
| I: | And what does he say? Does he work more? |
| Bogdan: | And he has two years there. And he works the same way, so it's not … well, it depends on how many orders the company has. They can put you for 12 hours, for 10 or 8. |
| I: | Yes, but in two years he gained their trust that he does the job well and … |
| Margareta: | Yes. |
| Bogdan: | The best, the best paid and the oldest worker there, a tailor there, got 30 millions plus. That's the maximum. He is the oldest. So … It is something to get 30 millions in Romania, right? […] |

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[2] Lei: the Romanian coin. Ten million lei was the equivalent of €250.

I:            How is it best: to do enough to carry out the tasks or to be very involved?

Margareta:    To show your interest.

Bogdan:       Of course, if you are well intended, you do it all.

Margareta:    It is visible.

I:            Is it?

Margareta:    Yes.

I:            And the boss rewards you or …?

Margareta:    Not necessarily in money but he sees you with other eyes.

Bogdan:       Of course. Just think a little bit if the boss comes, takes a look, sees you working well. What he thinks? Well, let's give this guy more to work. More work, more stuff to do, more money. Understand? You have to be a bit smart. That's the trick! (Margareta and Bogdan, grade 11, textile class, small town)

Previous literature (Warren 2016) asked whether workers enter employment purely for the money (i.e. for 'extrinsic' rewards) or whether 'intrinsic' rewards (such as the satisfaction gained from doing a job well and developing skills) are also important. This research suggests that even in a context where young people start to build up some awareness that hard work is neither valued, nor well paid, they retain elements that cherish work for its' intrinsic rewards. According to this view, the individual claims ownership of the process and becomes the only legitimate instance of judging the quality of the work done:

I:      How is it best to do a job? To do you do as enough to accomplish your tasks or to get involved?

Dan:    To get involved!

I:      Why?

Dan:    To prove yourself that you can, first of all, and …

I:      How do you see the situation in a place like [company X]. Do you think that workers are rewarded somehow, or they have some advantages if they work harder, or?

Alex:   No.

Dan:    Not really. It's only about the way you feel about yourself. You set your heart at ease that you have done so much, and you did a good job. (Dan and Alex, grade 11, locksmithing class, rural area)

There are basically two major companies Dan and Alex can work as locksmiths in their areas. While the high income earned by experienced workers there is an urban legend, the entry salaries are extremely low and the road to promotion is long. Young people's positive stance towards working in this particular setting was at odds with their general feeling as trainees left to navigate alone in a seemingly unfriendly environment. Separated in a training compartment, yet, without appropriate guidance, at best allowed to watch the work process that continued unaffected by their presence, young people's discourse on 'doing a job well for its own sake' (Sennett 2008) seems bewildering.

Overall, young people spoke about their future lives as revolving around work. There was no alternative discourse. Importantly, they rarely seemed to voice a sense of 'entitlement without contribution', as typically attributed to their cohort. Interviews suggest that—provided the chance—young people would prefer stable jobs. This research on Romania adds to the growing evidence (see data on the UK and Japan in Furlong et al. 2012) that many of those occupying marginalized positions do in fact want traditional (and secure) employment. Conversely, interviewees' belief in hard work departs from earlier statements that work ceased to be a 'key sociological category' (Offe 1985, p. 129). As argued elsewhere (Edgell et al. 2016; Frayne 2016; Tyler 2013), it may be that in fact the neoliberalization of work and employment increased the sociological and ethical centrality of work. This research points towards the persistence of an ideology of hard work (despite the post-work literature). The interviewed young people continue to perceive work—precarious as it may be—as a major source of entitlements and status.

As the case for the young people studied by MacDonald (1997) in the UK, this research was also unable to find an 'anti-work ethos' and pointed to work as the only acceptable way of gaining social respectability. Interviewees do not search alternative escape routes other than work (see the neoliberal condemnation of unemployment and idleness). With no alternative courses of action having social validation, hard work remains the only game in town. Mendick et al. arrived at similar conclusions in their research with 14–17-year-olds in the UK. However, they advise that one should not simply celebrate this investment in hard work. While it 'opens up successful subjectivities to previously excluded groups', still the

high value placed on hard work 'reproduces neoliberal meritocratic discourses and class and gender distinctions' (Mendick et al. 2015, p. 161).

Unfortunately, this research did not include a comparative sample, able to lead to more nuanced conclusions in relation to those in VET. We cannot say, for instance, whether the stated belief in hard work, as discussed above, is a characteristic of those in VET *alone*, or it is shared among those in high schools or their older peers at university, for that matter. Also, given the exclusive focus on VET students and the absence of a longitudinal approach, this research cannot advance causality inferences. We do not know, for instance, whether (and to what extent) the hard work and success nexus can be safely attributed to the ethos of VET schools themselves, to young people's earlier socialization or to something else.

## The Criticism of Unemployment

Young people's positive view on the role of VET and hard work coexisted with judgemental opinions in regard to those unemployed. Almost invariably, interviewees displayed critical stances on social entitlement and worth, in ways that rendered a debate on social inclusion ineffectual and hazardous. In a neoliberal understanding of self-governance, they seemed to agree that 'individuals are the sole responsible for their fate – good or bad', that failure is a personal responsibility and joblessness, close to a choice. Despite Romania having one of the highest levels of youth unemployment in Europe, and despite interviewees themselves drudgingly conceding they might face unemployment themselves, still the ideology of hard work seemed too powerful to consider otherwise. As we will see later on, this situation is far from unique. And there is a lot young people in VET can blame others for. They blamed the recipients of social welfare or those unemployed. But sometimes they also blamed their own peers (usually remote acquaintances or imagined 'others') who claim 'unreasonably' high salaries. But the criticism of unemployment is part and parcel of the belief in hard work. It tells about the potency of employment in shaping individuals' social standing:

Ovidiu:    There are many places where they are looking for people… Ford is looking….Toyota … Skoda. Any auto service seeks reliable mechanics. Not the type of guy that comes, works, steals and nobody's happy. So there are plenty of jobs, provided one really wants to work.

I:            I see.

Ovidiu:    People dream of 30 million or 20. But to sit and do nothing!

I:            What about these cable companies? Are they hiring?

Ovidiu:    O, yes! An awful lot! Because workers are now in their old age. They can no longer …I mean they no longer have the competences and how can I say … The body cannot resist anymore. I mean to work nonstop, from the morning 10 hours and over. Any other younger guy can do the work much faster. They are looking for younger and younger employees. So, one only has to want to work. But as no one wants to do the work, but claims a salary […]

Ovidiu:    There are many who say 'well…let's take a one-year holiday, 'cause I finished school… I'll sit and relax and then I go to work'. But if he's thinking really seriously, in this way he's missing a job offer he cannot get later on. You return, but the business owner cannot take you back. You cannot find the same opportunity anymore. But if you work here, maybe a business owner likes you, he sends you to a bigger auto service, to better trainings.

I:            Indeed…

Ovidiu:    You never know.

I:            And do you have such friends who said, 'I'm done with school, I'll take a one year off'?

Ovidiu:    Yeah, I had. He went to Spain, but not for a whole year. For a month. He left his job here, but it wasn't there when he came back. (Ovidiu, grade 10, mechanics class, city)

Ovidiu (highly regarded by teachers for being 'serious' and 'motivated') was raised by his grandparents, from whom he was likely to inherit a strong 'work ethic' based on progression and loyalty, together with a very critical stance to his generation. His parents, who, according to him 'did not exert a great influence', work in Spain. Two years ago, they

stated they cannot support his university education, in the case he enrols in a high school. As he always found 'high horsepower engines' fascinating and the alternative of working in hospitality or retail emotionally draining, he picked up mechanics. Ovidiu already secured employment in the place he carries out the training, yet he agrees that many business owners 'take advantage' of young people's 'sense of confusion' and avoid fair payment. For sure, people living on welfare do not have a good reputation for Ovidiu and for his peers. Young people's invariable accounts pointed towards what Winlow and Hall (2013) named 'negative solidarity', as a postmodern popular attitude towards welfare-dependent individuals. At times, interviews included racist hints such as depreciatory statements related to Roma, blamed for neglecting their children, for living in poverty without taking any action (read: work) to address the situation:

| | |
|---|---|
| I: | Do you know anyone who is unemployed? |
| Paul: | Neighbors. |
| Adrian: | There are on the dole, without bread on the table because they don't work anything. |
| Paul: | They prefer not to. It's not that there is no work. One can have the best job offers, but if they don't like to work … |
| Adrian: | The poor with many children have nothing to give them to eat. |
| Alex: | The Roma… |
| Paul: | They have children for getting the allowance. |
| I: | To get help from the state? |
| Paul: | Yes, the allowance has increased. (Focus group, grade 10, constructions class, city) |

Overwhelmingly, young people used a reproachful tone for speaking about instances of idleness. We tried to move the discussion from references to imaginary 'others', towards actual members of their networks in such situations. The intention was to see whether they can actually point towards young peers in such situations and see how the notion of choice unfolds. When the discussion was held 'in general' terms, stereotypical references to opportunistic use of the welfare system by the Roma were

almost invariable. When prompted to refer to specific situations, young people were able to jointly identify a young person[3] or two inhabiting this role:

I:          Do you have in mind such persons who have finished school and who do not work? What do they do?
Monica:  My cousin. She's not from the city. She comes here for a walk.
Ana:      They lie on bed.
I:          What do you think they need?
Monica:  Brain.
Iolanda:  Ambition
I:          Ambition? What would you do in their situation?
Iolanda:  I would give them advice!
I:          What would you do if you were the person you are talking about and whom you know very well?
Monica:  I'd try to look for a job
I:          How would you go about it?
Monica:  I'd search for a job. Or I would ask around where to find a workplace that I know I'd like and I can do, not to go for a month and then, stay home for the next two. Or to go to work, to get the salary and if I don't like it, not to go anymore….It has to be a stable workplace. (Focus group, grade 10, textile, town)

Monica spoke competently about her cousin's situation. To her, the opposite of parasitic dependence on parents is not *any* job, but a *quality* job: well paid, stable and enjoyable—a rare combination in her small town (not to say, in her cousin's village). Episodes of unemployment were frequent in between two migration processes. Those in such situations appeared to inhibit uncertain roles: restless, without the financial motivation to get employment, yet with savings from their work abroad

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[3] Young people saw Roma in collective terms: as families/communities. As they were situated at social distance, interviewees were hardly able to add shade and nuance to the stereotypical image of welfare recipients as opportunistic and, ultimately, disincentivized to work. References to individuals, on the other hand, rarely mentioned reliance on welfare: it was more a matter of parasitical dependence on indulgent parents and of lifestyle (being easy-going, playing computer games and hanging around).

and—probably—with the need of maintaining a sense of respectability incompatible with precarious work *at home*. Robert, a Roma boy repatriated from Italy spoke about his older brother who did not take any employment while expecting to go back to Italy. The two plan to go together over the summer, when Robert enters vacation (which is in two months' time) and, importantly, when a friend now there secures a working opportunity on their behalf.

Interviews searched for hints of social marginalization perpetuated by those still in school or in employment, towards the young people in NEET situations. An unexpected finding seemed to be the relatively similar economic status of those unemployed, with the ones in employment or in school. Young people frequently portrayed their unemployed peers as indulging with a lenient lifestyle, often with parental backing.[4] According to the interviewees, driving downtown, drinking a soda on a local terrace, smoking, playing computers back home, watching TV or having a good cell phone seemed to be elements of social life many of those unemployed enjoyed, as well. While the general consensus was that the unemployed peers are more likely to borrow money or to experience financial limitations, the advantages of being employed did not appear as very striking, either. On the contrary, interviewees portrayed their recently employed peers as always being tired, less likely to join a football match, caught in inescapable work-rest routines. However, despite these factual elements retrieved from interviews, still, employment attached social respectability and a more stable ground for engaging in romantic relations, for instance. Unemployment was never a purpose.

Overall, this research resonates with earlier findings that we now witness a radical shift in how people see unemployment. According to Standing, in the 'pre-globalisation era', unemployment was seen as a consequence of economic and structural factors: 'the unemployed were unfortunate, in the wrong place at the wrong time' (2016, p. 53). The recent years, however, turned unemployment into a personal responsibility, if

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[4] A part of the young people in NEET situations seem to be heavily involved in subsistence agriculture: taking care of the cattle or land cultivation. Interviewees did not perceive the young people in these situations as 'unemployed'. On the contrary, they seemed to attract a strong sense of appreciation in relation to the hard work.

not a choice. The reversal of the trend seemed less likely, however. For instance, during the UK recession of the 1980s, it was suggested that the endurance of mass unemployment, especially when concentrated in certain regions, might put an end to the stigmatization of unemployed people, as the high rate of joblessness could 'no longer be accounted for plausibly in terms of individual failure or guilt' (Offe 1985, p. 143 cf. Frayne 2016). Yet, it turned out that people related to unemployment as an individual failure. Thirty years later, Frayne spoke about an 'ideological fortification of work in neoliberalism', manifested through a 'revamped ideological focus on the virtues of "hardworking people" versus society's so-called scroungers and skivers' (Frayne 2015, p. 16). As the current research suggests, the same seems to be the case for the young people in Romania's VET.

Ultimately, young people's radical positions on unemployment do not emerge in a vacuum, but in a discursive context tributary to the same normative thinking. At the time of carrying out the fieldwork, state's social welfare spendings attracted high social resentment and allegations of populism, accentuated by the record number of unfilled job openings. The employment offices, as well, echoed the political and media accounts that feed a state of acrimony against those 'claiming benefits without contribution'. The employment offices in the city of Cluj-Napoca, for instance, carried out large-scale campaigns with messages 'Be active' and 'You also deserve a work place. It's your right. Don't give up.' The conflation of employability skills with social inclusion (Atkins 2013), as well as the invariable view of jobs as 'offers' and 'opportunities' are part of the same rhetoric that obscures a critical look at the workplaces that are, indeed, precarious, daunting, exploitative and so on.

The above understanding of employability fails to acknowledge the potency of other structural issues, such as the quality of jobs 'on offer' and the major problem of in-work poverty, as a quarter of Romania's employee earn the minimum income. This positions the official discourse as an 'instrument of domination' (Schubert 2008, p. 183) because of 'attributing blame to the individual' while discouraging any critical stances on government 'responsibility for macroeconomic policy' (Atkins 2013, p. 31). It does not come as a surprise that even when minimal awareness at structural constraints seemed to emerge (e.g. companies

restructuring and absence of workplaces in proximity), still interviews contained the suspicion of individuals being complicit in such situations. In this context, in 2018, the Parliament voted by a large majority against the provision of welfare benefits to claimants able to work and refusing one employment or training 'offer'.

# The Quest for Craftsmanship

Sennett argued that all human beings want the satisfaction of doing something well and want to believe in what they do (2006). Craftsmanship involves control over the work process and work with meaning. It is close to the concept of dignity, as defined by Sayer: 'to be in control of oneself, competently and appropriately exercising one's powers' and to exercise 'self-command and autonomy' (2007, p. 19). Interviewed young people seemed attracted by materiality: the experience of making and fixing things with their hands, a practice largely lost in recent years (Crawford 2009). Almost invariably, interviews started with young people declaring they are in VET because they 'want to learn a trade' and have a job later on. Their discourses used a very normative definition of work as full-time, permanent employment.

In grade 9, young people gain the training in school workshops. They familiarize themselves with materials, tools and the principles of carrying out the work. Many girls and boys resonated with their school-based practice, which was often built around the ethos of craftsmanship. Those studying carpentry, for instance, craft miniature wood-houses or pyrogravure; those in textile design create simple clothing items or even more complex outfits for their own use. During interviews, they proudly showed photos on their telephones with the items they produced: bow ties, skirts, waistcoats or protection equipment (smoks) to be used by colleagues working in constructions. The sense of having made a social contribution was inherent. The appliances from school workshops are often 30 years old. By having physical contact with basic tools, young people in VET do not experience a sense of estrangement from materiality; they are able to imagine solutions, to improvise and be—to a certain extent—bricoleurs.

On the other hand, they miss the recent developments in the industry, as the infrastructure can sometimes be very outdated.

In grades 10 and 11, young people are supposed to get training in 'real-work settings' secured by schools on their behalf. Their learning is highly dependent on the local economic environment, on companies' resources and availability. Often, the partnership with local firms is dependent on lengthy personal relationships between the school staff and companies' leadership. The rationales for a company to receive young people in training vary: from making a personal service to a school staff member (while the firm may not actually allocate adequate resources for training), to a need for cheap labour or for extending its recruitment pool.

Young people are not passive in this process. Sometimes they try to transform the training experience in ways that responds to their learning needs. An unanticipated finding was that many interviewees found the opportunity to work in a small-scale unit more attractive and engaging than work for a large employer. The distinction between the two types of settings resonates with the classic distinction between 'teaching all about a job' and teaching 'all an occupation is about' (Thompson 1973). Learning 'all an occupation is about' refers to gaining an understanding of a trade in relation to the worker's contribution to a particular industry, to the broader society, as well as to the immediate community. It includes awareness at workers' lived experiences and the lifestyle expected when entering a trade. Conversely, the training placements in large firms have a narrow focus on skills, are sometimes repetitive and without an overall understanding of the entire production process and, also, without much awareness at the 'all an occupation is about'.

According to the interviewed young people, the small firms enable them to exercise different skills, to have an overall understanding of the entire production process and also to engage more closely with other workers' social worlds. Young people spoke at length about a sense of 'togetherness' with other workers and about the chance of experiencing different stages in the production process. Importantly, as well, young people in small-scale units had a first-hand experience of relating to the business owner, an occurrence refused to those gaining training in large companies. The sense of completing a 'round' project was more pervasive

in small units: young people knew where a (small scale) production chain starts and where it ends, while the practice in large companies seemed suspended: 'they produce components for ships. No idea what they are for. They are sent to Netherlands. Really heavy stuff' (Alin, grade 10, welding).

But small-scale units also pose a higher risk for young people to be used as replacement for paid staff, especially when the enterprise is focused on its own survival. For instance, the bakery training for a class was divided between a major retailer with an in-store bakery, an important company and a family bakery. Interviewees agreed that the last, small-scale unit seems a better place for learning the trade, yet, not without certain resentments over 'being used' as cheap labour. Those in the large-scale companies complained for being involved in routine tasks perceived as very remote from the trade: packaging, loading, depositing and cleaning.

A century ago, Dewey (1916) argued that vocational education has to meet two major goals: to enable young people to discover the occupations they are suited for and to develop their capacities to actually exercise that occupation. The interviews went along these two goals as lines of inquiry. Thus, young people were asked whether they feel good at doing something, in order to explore the extent VET meets this purpose and the extent young people have a sense of value, talent or a perceived area of competence. To make sure, the word 'vocation' (not to speak about *calling*) was absent from young people's accounts. Yet, in many other ways, young people approximated meaning that comes close to vocation' semantic field. They did speak about the pleasure of doing things, about 'being good at' something or, at least about some imagined occupation that would suit them.

When working in school workshops, it was relatively easy for them either to identify themselves as competent in creating something or to name a classmate considered to be 'the best'. Sometimes the realization that they are 'good at' came from informal settings that attached social validation: family house renovations, auto or bicycle repair for friends and neighbours and hairstyling. We retain, for now, the pertinence of the idea of vocation for some young people, despite a less favourable context able to 'nurture' it, as well as their desire to pursue their inclination.

Some young people demonstrate a strong drive to understand how things are made and enthusiastically engaged in discussions demonstrating backward thinking (Sennett 2006):

Anita:   I'm on the joinery profile because I like it and it seemed very interesting to me when I was in the 8th grade, before coming here. It is interesting and curious to see how you make furniture, how you make chairs, a miniature product, and even a bigger one. It is very good. I really like it.

I:       Clara?

Clara:   I enrolled in this school more for curiosity. It is interestingly to find out new things about machines you have never seen. How they work, what you can get by working on these machines. It seems to me a nice thing that you can make an object you can use, out of a piece of wood that is… let's say …I mean, anyone would want to go to a factory and see how the furniture we have at home is made and to think: waw! how it got to be so beautiful from a piece of wood. It is beautiful.
         […]

I:       There is an old saying: A handful of trade is a handful of gold. What do you think? Is it still valid?

Anita:   I think it is true what they say…I mean, I don't know…A trade is something that is part of your life. (Anita and Clara, grade 10, joinery class, large city)

There are not many places where Anita and Clara (and their colleagues) can do the work-based practice in an artisanal manner. The training placements are in the highly standardized production settings. Young people spoke at length about the new, multifunctional woodworking equipment based on electronic commands and standardized production. The de-skilling of the occupation—with technology doing the woodworking and reshaping workplace hierarchies was, for some, a major departure from the first-year curricula. Interviewees noticed how one cannot really tell who the best woodworker is, while otherwise experienced joiners are now assisting the machine which does the work. Against the above background, when in grade 10, Anita and Clara preferred to continue with the

school-based training (i.e. the production of small-scale craftsmanship items) and not to go for the work placements in the industry, like their colleagues.

Speaking about the link between what they learn in school and the actual labour market demands, young people noticed the gap, yet not without appreciation for the advantages of technology that makes crafts-manship redundant:

> Teodor:  If you really like it and you want to do this job [smile], if you [smile] know for sure you can get a lot out of this thing yes, you can make a living with the trade. But today, I don't know how to put it…. [hesitant] everything is mechanized. Nobody looks for you to do a thing like this. You don't just go to someone to make you, for example, wooden furniture, as long as you can order it directly and have it within a week, not in 3 months. And it is done very precisely […] If you do it for yourself and you work it [excited]: 'Well, this is my work, I'm glad I did it. I didn't pay for it'. But even so, there are some costs. (Teodor, grade 10, joinery class, large city)

The school *maister*, approaching retirement, persisted that handmade woodwork is still in demand for clients who know to appreciate its value and have the money to purchase it. Yet, he agreed—with a discrediting tone—the largest employment sector is in standardized, semi-skilled woodwork, which may not require the three years of training the school provides. Moreover, as young people gradually lose interest in artisanal work, he tries to make the best of it with those in grade 9. An implicit sense of nostalgia for craftsmanship, in regard to both the industry and young people's inclinations, was implicit in his account:

> Maister:  [pointing to an image of handmade baroque furniture] This is art! You have to work gently, with care to get out this quality piece. One needs to be really skillful to make this. It's not only about cutting straight [pointing to a standardized, factory-made wood piece]. It's about dexterity, delicate work and patience.
> I:       Does the industry still needs that?

Maister:   O, yes! We had inquiries from [a department on artisanal furniture]. I would make more than miniature houses with these kids…I would like to teach them to make chairs, but you know what? The selection pool is very little: 10–15 pupils …take everything from the scratch…And older they get, less focused they are. Thinking of sex….skipping classes…It's the age. (Maister, joinery, large city)

*Maister's* trust in the value of craftsmanship represents the type of discourse young people in VET are occasionally exposed to. He refers to a very old and prestigious furniture factory the school cooperated since the 1980s. Factory's 'golden age' is gone, following fraudulent privatization, environmental damages and gradual decreases in production. A single division produces artisan and handcrafted furniture. The work there is highly feminized and very low paid, despite production being export driven and extremely expensive. Interviewed factory supervisors stated that on the long term, work there raises occupational safety concerns related to spinal health and exposure to paint fumes and dust.

In an unpredictable turn of meaning, young people construct craftsmanship as a self-contained choice. To them, 'a thing done well for its own sake' in a world that does not value it, carries strong meanings of agency and is internalized as a statement of non-alignment. However, this new approach to work, whilst meeting an important personal function, is stripped of the social dimension that characterizes vocation (Sennett 2008; Billett 2011; Hansen 1994).

I:              In general, those doing well a trade are named 'craftsmen' (rom. *buni meseriasi*). Are craftsmen still, well regarded today, or something else matters more?
Bianca:      I don't know. Perhaps there are some who are well-regarded and are considered good craftsmen, but I do not think it really matters so much …what people think about how you work. You know you do that thing because you like it and you are capable of doing it.
Georgiana:  Right.
Bianca:      If others do not like what you do, they may well criticize you and that's it. (Bianca and Georgiana, grade 10, joinery class)

Craftsmanship has a good reputation among young people in VET. There was actually no instance when young people looked down on crafts. To counterbalance the overwhelming drive for liberal education, craftsmanship became important as a proxy for having made a 'wise choice'. For instance, some interviewees incorporated craftsmanship within the potent rhetoric of risk-taking that speaks about a neoliberal societal ethos, implicit in the 'entrepreneurial spirit' and a cherished part of the masculinity culture. While the support for the virtues of risk-taking was, indeed, overwhelming (and expected), it was surprising how in few occasions conventional aspirations were accommodated within this potent rhetoric. For instance, a young person defined risk in terms of going for VET, despite the high value attributed to liberal education (*craftsmanship as a risk*). This type of reasoning, while rare, is however, thought provoking in the sense that it shows that the purposeful focus on a trade is meaningful for young people and they actively search to incorporate this deep-seated drive within the more recent frames, such as the one of risk-taking. However, very few young people had a first-hand contact with a craftsperson:

| | |
|---|---|
| I: | How many from your class, do you think, will earn their living from tailoring? |
| Olivia and Mia [laughing]: | Nobody. |
| I: | Nobody…How many do you think wanted to become tailors when they came here? |
| Olivia and Mia: | No one. |
| I: | Do you know a seamstress that has a happy life? |
| Olivia: | No. |
| I: | So, you say No. |
| Isabella: | I don't know… |
| Monica: | Yes. My godmother. |
| I: | You said yes….What do you think makes her happy? |
| Monica: | She likes her job and practices it whenever needed. It's a kind of family legacy. She works on her own, but she also worked at a company that closed down…long time ago. When I was young, she used to make me little dresses and things. (Focus group, grade 10, textile class, town) |

For Monica, her godmother was an inspiration: she made from scratch pieces that were beautiful in their own, which carried deep family meaning and created bonds. Monica wanted to follow her example ever since she was very young. Despite the appearance of a calm and quiet person, she challenges her colleagues' stereotype on tailoring, by virtue of her close relation with a significant adult. She continues to be the only one in a class of 19 who wants to work as a tailor, despite some shared awareness that textile work is highly precarious. Instances of this kind confirm we cannot aggregate young people's views on what is worthwhile work. The meaning attached to work is very personal. Different young people shape an understanding of 'what is good work' based on personal dispositions, networks or experiences. We learned not to start with our own assumptions about what it means to be a middle class and how good or bad it is to have a certain occupation (Billett 2011). In understanding the value of a job, we should go beyond common ingredients such as income and an agreed measure of social value. At least at this moment in time, for young people there are also other things that matter, such as a very context-specific configuration of social standing, different from a general view on respectability and status. It is the potent idea of 'being like…' that matters. However, this reconfiguration of value may also carry the risk of accrediting the idea that *some* young people do not want the same things from work as others, which is politically hazardous.

As a reaction to work environments that trade quality and responsible work for low production costs, young people project overseas work as an emblematic space for decent work. A focus group included the account of a young man whose brother became—according to him—the successful owner of a chain store in Italy. He proudly presents his history of progression and struggle, probably a replica of his brother moralizing 'grand narrative'. The interviewees share the opinion that the structural conditions available abroad make high achievement by hard work possible, despite obvious strains. The story has its own elements of difficulty and deception, and still, it is proposed as a counterbalance to the limiting possibilities back home (as 'here, it's not like there'):

Alex:     My brother in Italy, when he first went, he did not go like 'That's it! I'm opening a chain store'. No! He went there as a simple labourer in constructions. So when workers took the lunch break, he did not stay to eat. He took a sandwich in his hand, and with the other, he applied putty on the wall. And when the *maister* asked 'what are you doing?' he said he wants to learn. And until the *maister* had his lunch, he used that time to learn something. It is only after that he started to be…you know what I mean.

Laura:    Yes! Right!

Alex:     He climbed up to become the boss over all, to coordinate the whole thing.

Laura:    Indeed.

Alex:     And then it started not to … not to have many orders and the things started not to work out. The same: people didn't pay and stuff… There was a lot of stealing going on… And he invested the money in stores and he opened up a chain store.

Laura:    I had a girlfriend that did the same.

Alex:     So, all in all… He started from zero, literary zero. So, they slept… How many …15 in a room? Do you realize what was there? Sleeping so many in a room… I cannot even sleep with another person in the room. It drives me crazy. I simply cannot! But to sleep 15 in a room! That's completely insane. (Focus group, grade 10, textile class, city)

However, in general, migration was rarely related to work in the VET area. There, payment alone epitomize the work worth doing:

I:          How would you see yourselves … let's say … in 10 years' time?

Victor:    Employed in a field like this…mechanics…and …

Claudiu:   And here comes the money!

I:          Aha … basically to get a life…

Victor:    Like if you can make something here! Rather, you go abroad, than here!

I:          I see…

Claudiu:   Here, a job is not paid for …

Victor:    There, they pay! 'Cause they need people there! Here's lousy payment …

| Claudiu: | You go over there and you can eat three days with 10 euros! You come here and you eat a day! |
| Victor: | You go to the restaurant here and money is over! They pay you over there, 'cause they need workers and they don't make a difference. |
| Claudiu: | That's why many Romanians have gone abroad! |
| Victor: | These guys [employers in Romania] … they want you to work … no matter how you do the job … they don't care! |
| I: | So they don't focus on quality … |
| Victor and Mircea: | Noooo! |
| Victor: | They want as many workers as possible with little pay. (Victor and Claudiu, grade 10, mechanics class, small city) |

Yet, it is not always that young people attribute the tendency to reject craftsmanship to employers. Several interviewees engaged in a critique of their own peers, in ways that touched upon their sense of greed, entitlement and the tendency of striking it rich fast. For instance, asked about workplaces in the area, two young men in a mechanics class argued that there are 'plenty' auto services looking for mechanics, but:

| Robi: | The thing is that young people can only work at entry level. They are beginners, but they want to earn a lot from the onset. From the onset, no one will give you that money, 'cause it takes some time until you get used to it, you are not that trained, he needs to see how you are working, and only than…But the majority that get the job expect to make it from the very start. To hit the big time… |
| Valer: | Maybe before, they assign you to work alongside someone more experienced, maybe you have a lower salary … less than that person, but you learn, I mean, after all, you always have to learn… there are plenty of cars and engine types that take time to learn. (Focus group, grade 11, mechanics, small city) |

Young people seem aware at the value of having a more consolidated theoretical background and a longer exposure to a community of practice, the perceived advantages of VET. This is a main reason they see no

danger or sense of competition with 'others' for the same jobs. Indeed, this overconfidence is part of the school ethos that tacitly discredits the value of short-term courses leading to certificates of similar market value.[5] Often—despite poor infrastructure and weak partnerships with the industry—schools continue to build up a sense of unicity and value for the trade learned. This sense of pride is helping young people navigate a road that goes from an initial feeling of shame for being in VET, to a later realization that they have made a 'good choice'. The next two sections develop on this fragile emotional trajectory.

## The Need for Social Validation

Identities come into focus when threatened. And VET provides abundant motives for young people to feel their social and professional standing is under siege. Consequently, they actively search to respond. According to Sennett (2006), *status* is perhaps the most elusive word in the sociologist's lexicon. He argues that status is widely considered an attribute to the upper class; yet, its deeper meanings are linked with legitimacy and a sense of being useful. This section argues that status (as legitimacy) does carry meaning for young people in VET. They *also* feel the need to project themselves as persons in the world, holding respectable workplaces, able to make choices and deserving validation.

The section draws on the discovery that although the types of jobs available to young people are horizontal, they are actively searching for possible ways to work up an imagined occupational ladder: by claiming skills (through the VET certificate) or by building up clientele (e.g. those preparing to work as mechanics or in the service sector). It is suggested that young people seem vaguely aware that the occupational structure has changed and that employees can rarely start low and build up their trajec-

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[5] However, the high value young people place on VET does not exclude strategic 'ways out' via short-term courses (of the same type as the ones they discredit). This is particularly the case for those less confident in the quality of learning or in their own capacity to exert the VET occupation.

tory to the top. Ultimately, it discusses several ways young people negotiate the sense of marginality generated by their role as VET pupils.

Given the tendency towards tertiary economy, service work is an interesting case study for revising the social meaning of work. It is fundamentally different from traditional types of 'productive' labour in the sense that it is 'reflexive'; it does not have a shared measure of productivity and, ultimately, 'produces and maintains work itself' (Offe 1985, p. 138). How young people relate to service work, given a (possible) societal inclination to attribute value to industrial, production work? We asked young people whether they see any ladders of progression into the jobs they wanted to have. Despite projecting themselves in rather horizontal occupations—like the ones in the service sector—young people invariably searched for or imagined progression routes. There was actually no instance when young people said there is no possibility to progress in a certain job. 'Reaching to the top' held the promise of prestige and titles. A higher income emerged as an ultimate side effect, but it was rarely the major trigger: if you are a waitress, you can become a chef de sale; as a mechanic, long practice brings you prestige, more clients and money.

Young people's accounts reflect their actual need to work in environments that offer prospects for advancement, where experience is valued over amateurish work, and where they can build up prestige. One example was a focus group where young people preparing to become waiters/waitresses explained the prospects of creating reputation and clientele, by customers' feedback (an unlikely occurrence and possibly anecdotal in the absence of a structure for this type of 'data collection'). Their concern for customers' well-being positions young people as 'emotional proletariat' to be, that is, low-paying, low-skill service workers that require the display of friendliness and deference to customers (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996):

Sorin:  Customers launch you the best!
Eva:    If customers go and say to the business owner that they liked you, you're the best!
Sorin:  Yes!
I:      Really? Next time I'll know that. So leaving the tip is not enough. I have to give feedback to the business owner, as well [laugh]

Sorin:   and not just to the business owner. To friends, to advertise! (Focus
         group, grade 10, tourism class, small town)

Soon the dialogue started to take the form of an imagined scenario in
which the prospects of vertical mobility generate tensions among col-
leagues. The solidarity with peers soon gave place to the expectation of
mobbing as an inevitable cost of success:

| | |
|---|---|
| Eva: | Yeah, then there will be so much envy between colleagues. For example, maybe there are three of you and you are the only one moved up. They will no longer see you as they used to…I mean, warmly. [with an implied tone] You imagine… |
| Dana [with an explanatory tone]: | Envy is everywhere. |
| Eva: | They will give you an icy look |
| I: | So it's good and it's also bad, to be well regarded … |
| Dana: | Well, you know when you get somewhere up and they're all down. No? Would you feel good? |
| I: | I don't really know….maybe I would not care that much [laughs] |
| Dana: | not to care…. |
| Sorin: | In some cases you care about them, 'cause you worked with them, you know how they are … |
| Eva: | But it depends on how you think. Maybe someone would say: well, it pays to be up there because she really worked hard. Another would say: How comes? Does she really deserve to be there? |
| Dana [simulating an irritated voice]: | How many things I've done … |
| Eva [following up in the imagined scenario]: | Who knows what she did and … |
| Dana: | Yes, right! |
| Eva: | And I did much more or better |
| Dana: | I was supposed to be there, not her! Well why are not you? |
| Sidonia: | Eh! Why? (Focus group, grade 10, tourism class, small town) |

The above young people describe a de facto precarious workplace: with a high level of internal control exerted from equals. The worker-performer is put in the situation of defending the legitimacy of his/her acquired position, in the absence of clear forms of validation. The higher authority (here, the business owner) does not seem to intervene in order to justify or validate the promotion choice. Instead, (s)he puts the onus of reconciling the group dynamics on the employees themselves. And this is not an easy task. When the interviewer provocatively suggested that they might not care about (former) colleagues when 'moving up', all young people felt the need to delimit from this type of choice, as getting to the top is not 'at any costs'. So, despite employers' belief in employees' capacity to move fast across different work environments, to adapt to new teams, still young people intervene to compensate for organizations' 'deficit of informal trust' (Sennett 2006).

The concrete nature of the above entitlements remained unclear, as well as the actual position 'up there'. The situation demonstrates a certain level of powerlessness for the girls to clearly articulate the concrete rewards at stake. Their accounts, however, suggest that the otherwise 'horizontal' occupations may involve a heavy load of potential tensions and inequality of experience, ranks and reputation. Or, young people feel the need to project such expectations in their workplaces, 'horizontal' as they may be. This research adds to previous findings that workplace competitiveness and status orientation rank high among Romanian population, by large (David 2015). It confirms that 'seniority and titles' matter for those working with hands, as well (Sennett 2006). Previous scholarship on the service work centred more on employees' relations with clients and less on the relationships within the community of workers (Wharton 2016). However, this research brings to the fore the idea that the dynamics and hierarchies between employees, as well, are continuously negotiated, contested and defended (see also Mirchandani 2016).

Also, this research adds to the precarity/craftsmanship debate. Interviews with the young people in VET hospitality substantiate Carrigan's provoking idea that despite structural trends towards increased precarity and workers' alienation, the search for 'craftsmanship' and identity *through* work still organizes the pleasures and dissatisfactions of work and gives cultural form to 'I am' statements about one's working life (Carrigan 2016).

The idea that craft skills have not disappeared from modern economies is not new (see Mason et al. 1994 study of 29 food processing plants in four European countries, which indicates high variance and added value given by reliance on apprentice-trained bakers in Germany, for instance). What the current research captures, however, are instances of projected need for identification and meaning, yet without any indication on the actual possibility of maintaining them active over one's working life.

In Mason et al. (1994) and Carrigan (2016), work identity was created by a structure (a company system that placed value on the personalized training of the apprentices, or the expectation for baristas to engage in craftsmanship-like process). There, craftsmanship (or elements thereof) was expected by the very economic niche people were occupying. The young people in VET, however, appear to be in a situation where they actively search to *create* circumstances for expressing their *desire* for identification through work. It would be interesting to see if their actual working life will provide the enabling circumstances to actually maintain the identity symbols they seem to cherish.

## On Threatened Status

Young people in VET seem very sensitive to their threatened status. There were several instances that appeared to offend their sense of dignity: either as trainees or when in deceitful working relations. The way they relate to instances of insults to their sense of pride is an expression of Standing's anger, yet it contains a trace of the confidence involved in craftsmanship. Here is a vibrant discussion among young people in VET constructions around a hypothetical situation of not receiving payment for a job done:

Alex:   Well, I'd ask [for money] a few days ahead, if not, I won't finish.
Luca:   Or, if you don't get the money, you just ruin what you've done!
Alex:   Right! They don't give you the money, you put everything down.
Dan:    You only need a hatchet. Especially on tiles [laughs]
Felix:  [with anger]: Wait! I'm not going to break the tiles I toiled to lay! No way! I will break the guy's head, not the tiles! I'm fair with him. I do the work. But if he doesn't pay for it…[everybody laughs]. (Focus group, grade 10, constructions class, major city)

The sense of anger for not being paid (work as a commodity) intersects the idea that the young people (as craftsmen) *take care* about what they do (Sennett 2018). This distinction corresponds with the one between ideal and real values. As argued in Bergman, 'hard work for its own sake' emerges as a shared yet ideal value, while 'work for sufficient monetary compensation' is a more salient and influential value in day-to-day work activity (1998).

Schools were important settings where the young people in VET experienced a continuous need to negotiate their (threatened) legitimacy, notably in relation to their high school peers. The overrepresentation of disadvantaged young people in VET (mainly from rural areas), adds an element of (self)-exclusion. Indeed, it was not rare to see VET students marginalized in their own school: occupying a different building, having a different timetable and navigating the elitism of the social events that young people in high school attribute meaning to (e.g. the prom, the graduation ceremony and academic olympiads).

While in school settings, the VET status generated a sense of inadequacy/inferiority, not the same was the situation in the imagined labour market. Habitually, young people positioned themselves as having high status expectations and advantaged due to their higher exposure to practice. Whilst being against the elitism of some (high school peers or those aspiring to managerial positions), interviewed young people perpetuate elitism themselves, in regard to those situated lower on the occupational pyramid (notably, the manual operators in the de-localized factories in the proximity of small towns). Invariably, reference to their work appeared as a proxy for exploitation and a derogatory tone was sometimes implicit (e.g. 'operators' were considered society's unwanted relics: easily dismissed as 'rubbish', 'boors' or 'losers'). Only when interviewees had a parent or close friend doing low-skilled work for these companies, the tone maintained a level of empathy, care and condemnation for structural conditions that allow for precarious employment. Interviewees' rarely sympathetic attitudes remind of Winlow and Hall 'negative solidarity' (2013).

Yet, occasionally, companies themselves sent ambivalent messages that fed young people's derogatory views. For instance, a multinational automotive company, with a notorious profit-maximization recruitment

policy, signed a partnership with a local prison and created a separate department with additional security measures for over 100 inmates. Although the multinational promoted the measure as a non-discriminatory policy, young people seemed well aware of the economic rationales behind it. But such examples of 'othering' those not displaying a similar level of competence were instrumental in creating a sense of a common identity, relatively rare among those interviewed. Instances of this kind helped reinforcing their imagined positional advantage on the labour market, despite employers themselves demonstrating elusive support for VET.

On the one hand, interviews with employers suggest a poor visibility of VET. They rarely went beyond the general, positive assertions that VET is useful, and it would be good to have more of it given the many labour market constraints. But, many faced hard times when asked to refer to young employees with VET, or to VET trainees. Confusions with high school graduates were frequent, while some employers (not involved in VET lobbying or interest groups) were actually unaware that VET was re-established. On the other hand, young people seemed convinced that employers are looking for those with VET. Moreover, they considered there is no other social category competing for the same jobs. Whilst this may indicate young people's sense of confidence in their capacity to secure a workplace, it also suggests their structural incapacity to read the labour market through the lens of competing interests and groups. Often, schools played a role in maintaining the idea of a positional advantage. When going from one VET school to another, we noticed how a discourse on the value of a trade was articulated and shared by staff and the young people. While this was, indeed, unsurprising, a puzzling finding was the potency of this discourse independently from anything else: from school endowment, to the quality of learning. It confirms that 'teaching and learning are primarily social and cultural rather than individual and technical activities' (Colley et al. 2003, p. 472).

I:        Do you think you have an edge on the market when you look for
          a job, in comparison with other people who come to work?
George:   Yes.
I:        What would be your advantage?

Luca:       Because we have done VET and we have experience in what we do.

George:     Yes, yes.

I:          But how do you do that if you say that at *Electrics* you only had some tests?

Luca:       Probably we'll do something else in the future.

George:     Yes, yes, yes.

Luca:       I mean, to let us…

I:          Do you think you'll have more experience than someone who has been doing a course in those 3 months of work…?

Luca:       Yes, yes, yes. (Focus group, grade 10, Electronics class, major city)

The above young people—at the end of their second year—did not yet receive any consolidated training. At the *Electrics Company* (a major national player in this area) where they were assigned to do the practice, nobody assisted them; the young people were sent to an empty room to read and take notes from some random materials. There is nothing they recall as a learning output and chances are the next year will be similar.

Although companies seem in high demand for skilled workers, interviewed employers appeared sceptical that those just finishing VET have the necessary competences and willingness to learn. Companies' capacity/will to invest in training seemed limited, even when the skills crisis was obvious or imminent. For instance, a major employer with an entire welding team approaching retirement confessed they might have been more 'careful' and let a young person work alongside each welder, but they chose not to (and they continue to do so).

The interest of reinstating the attractiveness of VET comes from many sources, including some VET schools, media, employers and policy makers. The persuasive claims in favour of (more) VET parallel an ingrained social resistance on what VET can and cannot deliver. From the very beginning it emerged that many young people internalized the class divide as something inherent in the way societies work: *we cannot all be managers, or have degrees. Someone needs to do the work.* Their weakened structural capacity to see intermediary occupations may be read as a reflection of the hourglass economy that 'squeezed' the middle

occupations. Many other young people remained convinced that VET is no more than second-class education and tried to navigate the sense of shame thus generated. Some removed VET from any future developments and, convinced that their lives unfold somewhere else, seemed to wait for the time to pass until the age that will allow employment, migration or anything but school.

However, one should not be left with the impression that young people in VET feel their identity under siege on a continuous basis. On the longer term, young people in VET seem to undergo a trajectory of coming to terms with their status. This begins with a sense of failure and shame in grade 9, continues with troubled self-acceptance and, sometimes, with a sense of resilience, upon finishing school. Peers in VET provide a major source of validation by strong bonds of friendship, a sense of togetherness and mutuality (the 'ethics of community' cf. Arnett 2000). What is more, for many interviewed young people, VET functioned as a site of confidence building. Many have been the last in class, with very few experiences of validation until entering VET. It was not uncommon for the research to come across young people conveying a strong sense of pride for going from a last position, to being in the top. Relations coagulate differently, as the range of social differences among students is not very high. Indeed, protected from the social discomfort created by competitive peers and by established informal hierarchies, many perceive VET as a fresh start.

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This chapter argued that young people in VET feel strongly about enduring views of work. Their accounts substantiate earlier sociological conclusions that work can be more than what we 'do' and more than 'a way to pay the bills' (Koeber 2002). It can also be about who we 'are' or who we aspire to be in our lives (Warren 2016). We found it surprising that—despite the shifting labour market conditions in the last 20 years—earlier findings on young people's reliance to work as a major social signifier remain valid. The research resonates with MacDonald similar findings from mid-1990s, namely young people's attachment to

mainstream attitudes that value work as the key source of self-respect, as main definer of personal identity, as a social and (often) moral duty, as the foundation upon which to build sustainable family lives and respectable futures (1997). This research also shows that despite an unfriendly economic climate that discredits workers' subjectivities, people do need work that is fulfilling, meaningful and maintains a high level of motivation (Winch 2000; Cort et al. 2018).

Importantly, however, interviewees rarely aspired for jobs with a 'middle class' face or had plans for higher education. Their accounts were heavily permeated by the idea that they will have manual (yet qualified) jobs. This reminds us that engaging in meaningful work that is personally satisfying and which generates a sense of fulfilment is not an aspiration of the elites alone. Young people in VET (as well) have aspirations that revolve in the same area.

But young people's narratives on the value of doing a work well, for its own sake, seem at odds with large-scale cross-cultural data showing that Romanian people display lower levels of perseverance and discipline (i.e. the capacity to carry out a task all the way through with a high accuracy and quality) than German and American counterparts (David 2015). Interestingly enough, interviewed employers contradicted young people's narratives on hard work and 'good work ethic'. It may thus be that the powerful 'grand narrative' on how (young) people want to be seen (competent and conformists, in line with more general characteristics highlighted in David 2015) is not well aligned with their actual behaviours once in employment (where they may also face limiting structural constraints). The following chapters will, hopefully, shed light on this debate.

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# 6

# Neoliberal Aspirations: Agency, Choice and Experimentation

Young people's accounts can be read as ideologies at work. Describing their aspirations for a stable work life tells only a part of the story; their very conservative views on the future make only a first discursive layer. It would be a severe limitation to see young people in VET as invariably attached to an immutable 'work ethic' that links individuals with stable jobs and craftsmanship. Young people in VET also need to react to more recent, pressing tendencies that influence their drive for stability and predictability. A second discursive layer goes beyond the 'ideal values' (the grand narrative), to the 'real values' that are relevant in shaping young people's actual interactions in the world. Chapter 6 sets itself the task of decoding young people's narratives that fall within the broader neoliberal thinking (i.e. high aspirations, centrality of personal happiness, consumption and experimentation). It suggests that these neoliberal tropes seem to bring young people from VET closer to Standing's definition of *the Precariat* characterized by a sense that 'labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure)' (2011, p. 14).

Neoliberalism is a concept loaded with a 'negative normative valence', while signifying a 'radical form of market fundamentalism with which no

one wants to be associated' (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, p. 138). Yet, as argued in Flew (2014) the denunciatory force associated with the use of neoliberalism is in inverse proportion to the extent to which it has a shared meaning in the academic literature: 'the term is effectively used in different ways, such that its appearance in any given article offers little clue as to what it actually means' (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, p. 139). It comes that the term is often reified as 'an all-purpose denunciatory category' (Flew 2014, p. 51). In order to increase the conceptual utility of this 'oft-invoked but ill-defined' concept (Mudge 2008, p. 703), this book retains as useful the neoliberal concern with 'the management of freedom':

'More profoundly, [the governmental practice] is a consumer of freedom. It is a consumer of freedom inasmuch as it can only function insofar as a number of freedoms actually exist: freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the free exercise of property rights, freedom of discussion, possible freedom of expression, and so on. The new governmental reason needs freedom therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It consumes freedom, which means that it must produce it. It must produce it, it must organize it. The new art of government appears as the management of freedom.' (Foucault 1979/2008, p. 63)

As states 'outsource the responsibility for ensuring the "well-being" of the population' (Berry 2014, p. 65), the individuals are actually receiving the responsibility to act in their interest. The state is complicit in the neoliberal project by constructing itself in market terms, as well as in promoting a political culture that figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life (Brown 2006, p. 694). It comes that the discourse on 'personal responsibility' is part of the neoliberal endorsement of self-governance, whilst the new subjectivities are expected to 'look after themselves' (2014, p. 65).

As Foucault argued, in the neoliberal governmentality, freedom is 'not a given' but 'constantly produced'; it is constantly manufactured and involves a continuous interplay with security (1979/2008, pp. 65–66). Consequently, economic interventionism is constructed as a 'threat to freedom', while risk-taking receives high endorsement as 'the motto of

liberalism is "Live dangerously"' (Foucault 1979/2008, p. 66). Thus, liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills entered the neoliberal proposal for advancing human well-being (Harvey 2005, p. 2). Our analysis will relate to the above neoliberal process of self-governance, including the production of the entrepreneurial self.

Back in 1980s, Margaret Thatcher argued thus: 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.'[1] While neoliberalism restructures the labour market in ways that lead to precarity in terms of the qualitative changes in work processes, it also generates tendencies of precarity in the social order (Kergel and Hepp 2011). Thus, the neoliberal project simultaneously embraces a broad, ideological state power, but also the 'micro level of individual subjectivities and everyday routines' (Flew 2014, p. 61). Indeed, as argued in Barnett, 'extending the range of activities that are commodified, commercialised and marketized necessarily implies that subjectivities have to be re-fitted as active consumers, entrepreneurial subjects, participants, and so on' (2005, p. 9). For Courtois and O'Keefe, one such social change the neoliberal policy generates is the emergence of narration topoi such as competitiveness, performance, profitability (2015). Yet, the list is ongoing, as the people continue to internalize the neoliberal mode of governance. This is where our analysis aims to contribute to. Drawing on the idea that the neoliberal project has also micro-level implications, the analysis links young people's accounts with the broader notion of neoliberalism as a form of governmentality. The sections revolve around the neoliberal subjectivities young people in VET enact in the process of relating to work.

## Aspirations as Freedom. Or *if Life Was Fair…*

Many young people 'ended up' in VET in circumstances outside their control: localism, underachievement in the context of low quality of schooling, dysfunctional families, parental migration, poverty and so on.

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[1] Margaret Thatcher (1981) Interview for *Sunday Times*. URL: https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475

Many seemed certain that their actual abilities lie elsewhere and VET was close to a temporary accident. The sense of 'I'm here, but my soul remained in [another field]' was relatively frequent and sometimes carried a heavy emotional load. However, young people did not seem torn apart by divisive possibilities and aspirations, as they combined a deep sense of disillusionment with imagining a remedial strategy (a short-term training after completing VET or direct employment prospects). They tended to perceive their working lives in terms of a wide set of options that are accessible and ready to embrace (yet, confined within social class boundaries).

More than half of interviewees contemplated with certain lenience, another (more seductive and very different) occupation where they considered the employment prospects were realistic. This was not necessarily less precarious, in objective terms: type of contract, level of autonomy etc. In effect, young people appeared to trade the prospects of a precarious job for another, not less precarious workplace, and, apparently, to gain the perception of control in this process. It was, for instance, frequent for boys in the construction sector to envisage working as waiters, for some in a cookery class to be interested in working as truck drivers, while some girls in textile VET expected to work in cosmetics and retail. For many, the question 'what would you like to be when you grow up' was a pertinent inquiry, leading to vibrant discussions (despite the assumption that they are in VET 'for the trade'). See, for instance, the following fragment from an interview with a girl in a hospitality class. There are many contradictory options she tries to reconcile in an account that abundantly displays a myriad of (arguably incompatible) possibilities:

I:          And what are the things you don't like? [at the training firm]
Denisa:  Personally, authority. No way…. I told you. I don't like it! As long as I do my job and I know what I have to do, I don't like anyone to come to say, "You see…you didn't do that well."
I:          So, you thought about opening your own business.
Denisa:  Yes, I thought about it. Right. That was the first thing I thought about. That's why I was thinking about going to high school and to college, but in this time to go abroad to get some money to

do this because here with … With this system, we have no
chance to raise some money for a business. It's pretty hard.

I:  And what business did you think of? What would you like to
do?

Denisa:  I don't know. I'd do something, I don't know. A business to run
here and for me to work somewhere else, because…

I:  Oh! A business that goes alone here and so …

Denisa:  Exactly!

I:  And you earn money elsewhere?

Denisa:  Exactly! Yes.

I:  And what kind of… Have you thought about what kind of
business could run without you?

Denisa:  A pastry, a small pastry. That's what I'm thinking about. Or a
clothes shop. But it's a lot better to go for a pastry because today
money is short and people no longer … buy clothes that much.
But a pastry, I'd say, that would do. (Denisa, grade 10, hospitality
class, city)

In a focus group in a commerce class, young people engaged in a dis-
cussion that reflects a continuous repositioning between aspirations and
expectations. Two persons considered becoming lawyers. One was a
Romanian boy living with his grandparents in the city and another was a
19-year-old Roma girl, apparently with a history of youth offence, com-
muting from a village. The discussion swung between what they consid-
ered 'down-to-earth' expectations, such as working in a supermarket, and
close-to-ideal aspirations (becoming a lawyer). Their accounts speak
about capability deprivation: how ethnicity and class influence what is
actually possible to achieve:

I:  Previously you said that in a few years' time, we'll
find you in Court. What you mean by that?

Victor:  Lawyer!

I:  Lawyer…aha …

Diana [surprised]:  Really?? I knew he wanted to become a chef!
That he really likes it very much.

Cristina:  This is what I knew, as well!

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|---|---|
| I: | Now you discovered this. So, you want to become a lawyer. What should you do for this? |
| Victor: | The Law School. |
| I: | Aha |
| Victor: | After I finish VET. I received sponsorship and I also have support from a lawyer. He also has a master degree. |
| I: | Aha! Great! |
| Victor: | When my grandparents praised my cousin that he learns well and he can become a lawyer, then, I started to become very ambitious. |
| Cristina [looking at Victor with admiration]: | You would look good as a lawyer! |
| Diana [explanatory]: | when you see someone is a police officer, a lawyer, an attorney and that person is a friend of yours, then, this make you even more ambitious! |
| Cristina: | Well! You get envious! How comes! He can do that and I don't? |
| Antonia: | Well, you shouldn't! |
| Diana: | You shouldn't feel sorry because if you really want something… |
| Cristina: | For instance, if someone is older than me, she's 25 and she already works in the field where I want and I still have to go a long way, to get to college, to finish high school ….well…when I think… |
| Diana: | and you need money for college |
| Cristina [explanatory]: | for university, you have to pay. |
| Diana: | Well not for all faculties, not for all. |
| Antonia: | There are some that are free |
| Cristina: | Well, not all. But for the Law School, I can tell: you have to pay. (Focus group, grade 10, commerce class, city) |

The above interviewees seemed aware of 'who can do what' and of the 'unobservable opportunities that matter' (capabilities, according to Sen

1984). At times, the notion that it is, indeed, possible to 'live a life they have reason to value' emerged, just to be further curtailed by the realization that more mundane prospects are likely. For instance, when asked how many jobs they estimate having in their lives, Cristina, the Roma girl, said promptly: 'Well, if I'd be a lawyer, just one. Why to change it?' Yet, a few minutes later, she spoke knowledgeably about the pros and cons of working in a supermarket versus working in an ABC, stating which supermarket she prefers and the reasons why. Then, she meticulously displayed her migration plan, together with her boyfriend (with one salary put on the side). Notwithstanding all the above, towards the end, she brings her colleagues closer to the idea that 'anything is possible if you really want to.'

When prompted to speak about ideal futures, some disadvantaged young people developed on 'middle class' scenarios, yet with diffuse and incongruent elements borrowed from their actual experiences. They take refuge in ideal situations that are safe, secure and cleaned from the inherent troubles of their own lives, with scattered incompatibilities and unsolved tensions. The possible courses of action in order to reach the desired state were missing, however. Poverty is shameful; yet, young people find it difficult to completely elude its remnants when thinking about future. For instance, invited to comment about a family structure where women were housewives and men breadwinners, Lorand, a 19-year-old Roma boy from a placement, stated:

Lorand:   It would be good for both to have a job!
I:        Ahm
Lorand:   And this work place I mean, a high position and big money, if you know what I mean…with big money.
I:        Aham! When you say 'high position', what do you mean by that?
Lorand:   The high position is to have a really really good job and to earn a lot.
I:        Do you have an example of such a job?
Lorand:   Yes! In [city X] at Dacia. At Dacia Logan, the car company everyone knows it. Or Opel, or Peugeot or some company really really big where you can earn a lot of money. I mean, a lot!

I:          What could one work in such a company?
Lorand:     In the first place …to be the owner. I know one, I worked for
            him. (Lorand, grade 11, textile class, small town)

It was frequent for interviewees to indulge with the idea that (an exter-
nal and uncontrollable) future may hold incredible positive prospects.
While they attribute high instability to external causes, young people also
remained convinced that positive consequences can occur without any
action being taken from their side. They appeared to operate based on the
intuition that 'the future may hold unpredictable, positive outcomes';
what matters is for the 'agentic self' to remain open to possibilities out of
its control, with a sense of overconfidence in 'success against the odds', as
one 'can never know what the future holds'.

During interviews, some young people made deliberate efforts to posi-
tion themselves as complex and sophisticated, in ways that questioned
any intention of reducing their personalities to their VET status. For
instance, three young men in the construction field in a major city talked
about their intentions to work as, respectively, fashion models, football
players in high league and IT developers, yet without any actions to sub-
stantiate these ambitions. A young woman in a textile class stated her
intention to become a designer, although the small town she lived in did
not provide any demand or social space for this and her knowledge of the
options elsewhere seemed remote. These instances reflect young peoples'
far-reaching aspirations and dispositions. The lives they have reasons to
value are somewhere else.

A largely shared opinion among the interviewees was that migration
increases one's prospects, as it combines a high dose of unpredictability
with a large set of possibilities. Often, the potency of success stories
through migration seemed higher (and more appealing) than the imag-
ined prospects of employment and progression back home. Ultimately,
migration becomes a by-product of an environment perceived as lack-
ing prospects back home and which reinforces an ethos of
unpredictability.

But what is the place of VET in the imagined trajectories? Interviewed
young people appeared to hold mixed opinions about what learning is
and what type of learning matters. Many internalized divides between

(i) having a VET certificate, (ii) what 'one really knows to do' and (iii) 'how one's brain works'. Overall, interviewees seemed cognizant that certificates are needed for employment at home and are transferable abroad, but many remained convinced that the actual proof of competence rests in their actual capacity to do things. Almost invariably, the interviewees appeared very confident in their capacity to learn 'anything' fast and 'on the go'. Their sense of ease in imagining jobs remotely from their area of training was an unanticipated finding which fractures the middle-of-the-road view of VET within the 'skills for jobs' agenda. Interviewees seemed to value the audacity to embark in a task that is new and for which a cogent attitude would involve some reserve. Yet, 'not staying away' and 'jumping in' seemed to attract high endorsement from young people as signals of potential competence. To them, it is very important to 'be serious', compliant (yet self-interested) and smart (as a given, not as a result of education).

This research resonates with previous findings on working-class white British young people who see education as insignificant for their vocational goals, without, however, displaying a negative attitude towards schooling (Strand and Winston 2008, p. 264). In Sennett's terms, young people's inclination to imagine working in a different field suggests a culture that goes against the ideal of craftsmanship; it celebrates 'potential ability' and tolerates failure (Sennett 2006, p. 4). Importantly, however, interviewed employers from Romania suggest young people 'may be right' to think about their employability as shifting, fluid and contextual. Many agreed they ceased to be concerned about their qualification and actually searched for people that possess a minimum set of 'soft skills', loosely located around trustfulness, reliability and readiness to learn 'on the go'.

Are we right to see this high acceptability of change as a reaction (or even an adaptive strategy) young people use in order to navigate a labour market they perceive from the onset as unfriendly? Their propensity to imagine their ability and potential elsewhere (as many Romanians with tertiary education also do) may not be independent on structural constraints. Work is, indeed, more fragmented and increasingly precarious. This raises questions on the legitimacy of expecting young people to relate to a trade in the same way as previous cohorts.

In a labour market that is fluid, project based and unpredictable, Sennett (2006) sends a cautionary message. He argues that even when young people now enter relatively fixed work pyramids, their point of reference is 'the fluid model, present-oriented, evoking possibility rather than progression' (Sennett 2006, p. 79). Thus, one should not blame young people for being short-term oriented, at the expense of carefully planning their working lives. Close to the base of the occupational pyramid, when planning is difficult and progression is being replaced by horizontal job mobility, *not* setting up 'career goals' may well be an adaptive behaviour.

One can also relate young people's choice of moving in between different trades with a country's occupational structure. When the occupational identity is low, and employment criteria relaxed, young people are more likely to attribute little value to VET. In Romania, for instance, employers in the construction sector have been influential in obtaining legal permission to hire disproportionate numbers of unqualified workers. Like in other areas, a VET certificate helps, but it is not a must as reliance to unqualified workers became the norm in constructions.[2] This is a typical example of employers' failure to demand VET from employees (see also, Winch 2013). Indeed, young people know too well that they can work in constructions (or in textile, retail or hospitality for that matter) with or without a qualification. And many already did. The actual demand for VET from prospective employers (and the extent such demand can be maintained at a certain rate or level) is in need of serious analysis.

For the time being, a tacit complicity maintains the *status quo* with young people continuing schooling, as they need to be 'somewhere' and the work prospects for someone below 18 are very limited ('One cannot even sweep the streets, without 10 classes'). For many in construction VET, the dream jobs are rarely in constructions. See, for instance, the disconcerting accounts of two 17-year-old boys in VET constructions. The self-irony, as well as the intention to play around the question by

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[2] A predictable consequence is that VET schools in the area of constructions face extremely difficult times: merged, relocated or dissolved altogether. Interviewed teachers considered that stronger regulations in constructions—including stricter requirements for qualified workers would revive VET schools, increase discipline and safety at work and—ultimately—improve buildings' quality.

displaying a stronger sense of self, appears obvious. One of them deliberately trivializes the idea of building up a trajectory of achievement, by suggesting any trajectory is equally possible in a disturbed image over what is and what is not possible, desirable or right:

> Dan:        I would love to be a bodyguard and a driver. To go to the gym
>               … to stay … to eat, to drive, to give a punch if necessary…
>               Or paid assassin. But until then we go to construction.
> I:           What about you?
> Sebastian:  Chief cook! (Dan and Sebastian, grade 10, construction class,
>               major city)

For Leo, a young Roma boy, recently repatriated, VET is an intermediary solution, as well. He lived in Italy for the last 12 years where he even started a VET school. He studied solar panel installation for a year and speaks at length about his passion for football. In Italy, he played football for ten years, with apparent prospects of being selected at professional level. His dream of self-realization remained there. For the time being, however, he happens to be in a textile class of 16 (7 boys, 9 girls). Leo's transfer occurred during the school year, and he was in a bureaucratic limbo for a while. We can assume many elements out of his control played a role in his 'placement' in a textile school: a low capacity of his family to navigate the educational system and to make informed choices, the assumptions of incompetence associated with his ethnicity and the dare need for pupils in VET (textile). Leo shares his colleagues' sense of remoteness from the trade, yet, with an increased capacity to see VET as a mere temporary state in a bigger scheme of things. His purpose is to go back to Italy and to play football. His colleagues are also open to other work likely to become available, except textile. For them, VET is not more than a stand-by solution until turning 18, a psychological benchmark[3] for employment in Romania or abroad.

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[3] Employers, as well, seem reluctant to sign contracts with persons below 18, as the possibility of inspection seem higher.

## Happiness at Work?

The large majority of the interviewees appeared to go along the following reasoning: 'you have to find the job you really like'; once 'you found it' (*the perfect match*), it's 'up to you' to maintain it 'for the rest of your life'. After all, if you love your job so much ('it may even become your hobby'), why would you leave it? Stakes are high. Young people expect their working places to offer a sense of excitement and personal fulfilment, in ways that enrich their personal worlds. The old saying 'Just work hard at whatever job you get, and things will work out' has a new, neoliberal adagio. It speaks about the choice of a job you *really* like, which is well aligned and fundamental to *who you are* and which will make working hard a pleasurable undertaking. Interviews point to young people's aspiration to relate to their jobs—precarious as they may be—in a very deep, personal way. But, what may be wrong in the above line of thinking? According to Standing, rationales like the above make a 'fetish of happiness' and, thus, help create the base for people's disillusionment:

> By saying jobs should make us happy and that jobs define us and give us satisfaction, we are setting up a source of tension because the jobs most of us have to perform will fall short of those expectations. The precariat will suffer from stress. We should be happy; why are we not happy? The sane response should be that jobs are not there to make us happy, and so we should treat them as mainly instrumental, to obtain an income. Our happiness comes primarily from the work, leisure and play we undertake outside our labour, and from the income security we obtain from a job, not from the job itself. If this were accepted as the premise for social policy, we could pursue a balance between how we use our time. Intuitively, many in the precariat may understand that. (2011, p. 165)

It was argued, as well, that the importance of happiness at work and the search for the ideal workplace reflect the 'ideological fortification of work in neoliberalism' (Frayne 2016). Seen from this perspective, young people's investment of time and energy for finding the 'perfect match' is justified by an ideology promoting work as an essential part of one's life. Despite aiming towards manual occupations, interviewees' accounts were framed in the 'vertical' terms of progression, sense of achievement,

ambition, satisfaction and even bigger notions of impact: 'to have a purpose: to want to do something in life'. Or, these are considered, by large, the characteristics middle-class people attribute to *their* jobs. By producing discourses generally associated to middle-class young people, interviewees question this simplification. 'Having a job you really like' sits at the core of their aspirations, *as well*. Importantly, having 'any kind of job' was rare and more likely seen as a route for extremely disadvantaged young people—often Roma with previous menial work experience or, for those that intend to migrate.[4] This view of manual work as pleasurable is positioning young people in VET as neoliberal selves, yet, *within* the confines of a social class that internalized its domination and a sense of 'what is feasible'. Ultimately, interviewees displayed a deep sense of bounded agency; their discourses never challenged their social positioning, or the options considered viable for 'those of their kind'.

For instance, young people placed a strong focus on their personality traits, by describing themselves as ambitious, in constant mood for experimentation, as capricious or 'instable'. And, consequent with a neoliberal thinking, this emphasis on the self had the effect of minimizing the awareness at the structural constraints. For instance, when imagining things would not work out, young people tended to put the onus on themselves: they may leave a workplace because they 'have a problem with authority', because of changing their mind very often, because of their expectation that work has to be enjoyable, or because of their unceasing need for change.

The focus on the self provides young people a frame for 'reading' other labour market dynamics, as well. For instance, when prompted to comment on the reasons young people with higher education perform underqualified work in retail (a frequent occurrence in major cities), young people tended to frame underemployment as a choice:

Laura:    Probably they like it, even if they have a degree, or they finished medicine… They wanted to become a cashier, to socialize, to see people around, not to feel alone.

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[4] The possibility of having the 'job you really like' by migration was almost absent.

I:          Interesting….What do you think? Why are there people with
            college working at Kaufland?
            Do you need a degree to place products on the shelves?
Ana:        You don't need to
Victor:     They really love what they do
I:          Ahm… What do you think?
Zoe:        Or they got a degree and they did not find [a job] in the field
            that they wanted
I:          Aha…interesting
Zoe:        They like something else. (Focus group, grade 10, patis-
            serie class, municipality city)
Bianca:     Maybe they do not have enough confidence in themselves…
            Maybe some have not found a job they like and try something
            different that … I don't know. If you don't like something, try
            something else. If not that, try again and again till you find that
            one. (Bianca, grade 10, joinery class, rural area)

Conversely, doing a work they do not like emerges as an 'organic impos-
sibility', close to a draining experience one cannot even conceive of.
Interestingly enough, the narratives did not go deeper when parents' were
doing work young people found unappealing. There was no indication
that interviewees tried to engage with their parents' views about their
jobs. See, for instance, the account of a young man in a textile class,
rejecting the prospects of working at the same local tapestry company as
his mother:

I:          So, you found it nice, but you would not want to work
            there, right?
Oliviu:     No.
I:          Meaning that…
Oliviu:     I don't like it.
Teo:        He knows, as his mom was there.
I:          Oh! Your mother worked there.
Oliviu:     Yes.
I:          And what did she tell you?

| Oliviu: | Not necessarily … She said you need to stand. It's hard, that … |
| Teo: | Your legs start swelling. |
| Oliviu: | You have to make your target. If you don't, they start yelling like crazy… You have to give the right stitch… |
| I: | And you're concerned you could not do that? |
| Oliviu: | Not that I'm afraid, but I don't like it, no … If I don't like something, I cannot do it. |
| Teo [with an explanatory tone]: | He doesn't like it. (Focus group, grade 10, textile class, rural area) |

Young people's aspirations for the near future are often imagined trajectories of progress (albeit to an unclear status). Often, interviewees positioned themselves as determined, totally absorbed by their dream and, above all, going against the odds. For instance, was not the focus on VET, an external reader would imagine the citations below come from conversations among experienced employers with a deep understanding of workplace dynamics in a highly competitive field. Interviewed young people position themselves as aspiring to a place 'high', despite a conforming pressure from their peers, to which they react even if this involves jeopardizing long friendships. That the locus of their occupational expectations is a precarious job (waiters in a small town with limited tourism infrastructure) seems to carry little relevance, as individual agency (at all expense) gains priority. Ultimately, the accounts demonstrate that young people from VET—as well as their high school peers—inhabit a world where agency and a sense of personal freedom from others' constraining views are important drives:

| I: | In your opinion, what does success in life depend on? |
| Sidonia: | To do what you aimed to do. To have that ambition, even if things you don't want, happen […] if I want to go to work there and I don't get along with the colleagues there. And customers … are not the kind of people I like. I'm not interested in all these! I want to do this thing. In the end it will be good. It's gonna be ok. |

| I: | So, to keep working there… |
|---|---|
| Sidonia: | Exactly. To continue, not to give up. |
| I: | What would you say? What does success in life depend on? |
| Teodora: | The same thing Diana said. To put your heart and soul into that and to do what you really like. |
| Dana: | And to do that for you. Because you'll see yourself somewhere up. And others said to you that … |
| Georgiana: | You will not make it |
| Sidonia: | You will not get anywhere. That you're gonna fail. And you feel so … You feel you've reached the top, you showed them. |
| Dana: | You feel good. You're happy. Look, I did this on my own, even if nobody encouraged me. (Focus group, grade 10, hospitality class, rural area) |

While all young women taking part in the above focus group seemed highly motivated to achieve a place 'up high', none was able to articulate a clear image over what this position would actually entail. Their projection appeared more of a reason for mobilizing a threatened ego, than a goal in its own right (the advantages of the imagined workplace remain uncertain). The above girls display a wide range of characteristics that increase their capacity to adapt in work environments of the new economy: they do not expect to develop strong attachment to a work group (so they can work well with others in short-lived teams, as argued in Sennett 2006). The sociality of the dream job is doubtful, as the interviewee knows too well she resonates neither with her colleagues, nor with the clients.

In young people's definition, success involves a strong 'personal will'. The ambition to succeed is the major drive: the focus moves from the workplace itself (we are told nothing about), to the process of 'getting there'. In a clear manifestation of agency, they reject the occasional calls for recalibrating their aspirations ('others' tempering tone). Narratives of this kind show that social mobility matters for young people also when in manual, horizontal occupations.

This research actively searched for instances of young people's awareness at structural concerns that shape their communities' lives. Yet, their

accounts rarely touched upon the deeper social implications of their (prospective) work. They seemed concerned about 'doing the work they like' and, at best 'doing a work right'. Whether they are doing 'the right work' was almost absent. On the contrary, the fieldwork put into light blatant situations where it was not only that young people demonstrated a unawareness at major social problems, but also they displayed the tendency to capitalize on otherwise, unethical issues:

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|---|---|
| I: | Do you know any person that has a good job, a good life and to whom you would like to resemble in a few years? |
| Robi: | To give orders! |
| Toni: | At the shop, maybe. |
| Robi: | Not at the shops. |
| Sergiu: | I'd like to be a boss over the forests, above everybody else. |
| I: | Really? How? Please explain it. |
| Robi: | That's what he's gonna be! |
| I: | Do foresters have a good life? |
| Sergiu: | Not now. |
| I: | Not now? Did they have that before? |
| Sergiu: | Yes. |
| I: | And why isn't the same now? |
| Sergiu: | It's not like it was [laughs] |
| Robi: | Exactly |
| Sergiu: | I mean, it used to be good. One single day they can make a hundred million |
| Robi: | They were stealing |
| Sergiu [laughing]: | No, they didn't. Others did that. And overnight. |
| Robi: | They only got the bribe for it. |
| Sergiu: | That's for sure. (Focus group, grade 10, electricity class, municipality city) |

The above (urban) boys cherish the opportunity of becoming forest rangers because of income and influence, yet, without any reference to the mission of fighting against deforestation, a major public concern. On the contrary, there seems to be an implicit awareness at the ambivalent role

forest rangers may have (and the illegal financial gains) when complicit in illegal logging. In the same time, one cannot stop by noticing that the VET curricula do not include a strong focus on the emerging environmental concerns. Schools themselves promote the notion of fast employability at the expense of engaging critically with the social mission of VET occupations. Ultimately, this helps legitimizing the notion of learning for earning. Consumption intervenes as an inevitable by-product of this ethos.

## Consumption and Instant Gratification

Consumption matters for those in VET and it sits at the centre of a major social battle for symbolic power and respectability. In various degrees, the interviewees seemed driven by consumption as a status indicator. They displayed a large array of relationships with consumption: from instances of severe deprivation *from* consumption, to high competition for status and self-worth *via* consumption (i.e. owing an expensive phone or the promise of a car when turning 18). This section engages with Bauman's argument that given the inability of the poor to access the lifestyles that carry status in consumer culture, they are 'flawed consumers', deprived of identity and excluded (1998). It substantiates the opposite idea that the poor are more likely to act as a 'reserve army of consumers' who, when given the chance, embrace the same consumer culture (or its simulacra) in order to gain social legitimacy (Hall et al. 2008; Winlow and Hall 2013). Ultimately, the section advances the argument that by promoting the value of learning for earning, VET schools help (re)produce a cultural change in regard to what education means and what its purposes should be. The focus on immediate employability, so much part of VET 'marketing', risks reinforcing young people's short-termism by commodifying knowledge.

   Although the urban/rural divide seems rather crude and far from making justice to the high internal variance among those in VET, this research will use it in order to signal some major differences among young people. For instance, many interviewees from rural areas seemed close to the old

ethic of postponing gratification, while those from large cities seemed much focused on consumption. Indeed, according to interviewed company staff, recruitment strategies from rural areas have the short-time benefit of a good work ethic. But, as a practice coordinator in a dual school argued, young people from the country side start very soon to be focused on earning and consumption in ways that interfere with their actual learning. It may be that—in their quest for social validation—they are vulnerable to the pressure to consume, maybe more so than their urban peers, as they lack other forms of inclusion and the ways to resist. Moreover, a recent marketing study revealed that the difference in consumption between young people from urban and from rural areas is only one of access. Provided the same contexts, they would have the same consumption behaviour (Nielsen 2017).

Overwhelmingly, interviewed teachers described students as being 'restless', more focused on earning than on learning, very anxious to finish school and gain some financial security. According to them, some parents seemed complicit in legitimizing young people's need for social validation via consumption. The situation below illustrates how the urban-rural divide may sometimes be a misleading dichotomy. Asked about their plans for the years to come, two young men from the country side jointly imagined a 'decent future' with a house, family and financial independence. Before starting work, however, one of the two plans to have a car and already knows the details involved in immediate purchasing:

I:      What about your life in the next three-five years….
Ton:    I don't want to have grand palaces or a big fortune, I want a decent living.
Alex:   Not much.
I:      For example…
Alex:   Well, I would like to have my house, not to be on my grandparents' money and so…. A house of mine, my family, I very much want to buy myself a car next year.
I:      A car?
Alex:   A Volkswagen Passat or Golf 5. I'll get the license, then the car …
I:      Right. You don't have a permit. You are 17.

Ton:     Then start work and do something for ourselves. (Focus group, grade 10, construction class, small town near a major city).

The above seems an instance which 'decouples' employment from social identity or status, as argued in Beck (2000). The young man above aspires to own a car (and gain the social benefits that derive from car ownership right after turning 18), and only then to see what working options are around. Especially for a person from the countryside (raised by grandparents), this appears surprising and tells about the shifting relationship between work and status, as well as about a changing rural life. Here, as argued in Bauman, work is replaced by consumption as a major social identifier (1998).

The research confirms that consumption is a compelling force that embraces young people in VET, despite their marginal social status (and, to some extent, *because of* it). As Winlow and Hall (2013) insightfully discussed, populations defined as 'socially excluded' respond to the media injunction to consume either as outsiders wishing to gain a place inside the consumption world or as marginal insiders. Moreover, provided the conditions for the socially excluded people to be on the top, they would not move the world into a more socially inclusive direction, the authors argue (as the capitalist system reproduces itself also through subjecting the otherwise poor individuals to acts that reinforce the same structure).

This explains the social significance of expensive telephones among otherwise disadvantaged young people. Especially for those in the main cities, the school lives revolve around telephones: they buy one when enough money is saved, earned or won, they sell or pawn one when in trouble, ostensibly displaying them during classes or at the interview. The training coordinators complained that young people are focused on the phone, a school principal criticizes their spending habits immediately after receiving the scholarship, whilst some level of complicity turns potentially disturbing students into silent phone users during classes. For the interviewed young people below, poverty is shameful, close to stigma and expressed in limitations of indulging with consumption as instant gratification. The verb 'to have' carries strong identity meanings:

| I: | What could go wrong? |
| George: | Well, if I was to get poor….I'd take my life and that's it. I don't like poverty. |
| I: | What does it mean to be rich? |
| George: | Well… not rich, I don't want to be rich. I want to have what I need. If I want to buy a pair of shoes, then, I do buy a pair of bloody shoes. I should not wait for a month, until I've put enough on the side. I do not like these things. If I want to get a phone, I have to wait until summer… I don't like those things. You'd better kill yourself and that's it. |
| Adi: | And you have no other worries [laughs]. |
| | […] |
| Adi: | From the little you have, you have to make it. |
| Sebastian: | If you only get six million,[5] what are you doing? |
| Adi [with a depreciatory tone]: | Well, six million… |
| George: | A phone like this is 30… How much do you have to work if you have a six million salary? Do you have to work for three months? Well, I think I'll hit that boss in the head. |
| Adi: | Four. You have to work four months |
| George [throwing his apparently expensive cell on the table]: | Four months for this? (Focus group, grade 10, construction class, major city) |

As argued in Leonini (2017), for the above young people as well, consumption and leisure are major fields of investment, useful in positioning themselves as competent, resourceful and independent. Being able to indulge in some level of vanity equals self-work and is one of the few expression of adulthood they can engage with: 'I need money. A young person needs money. Especially if she's lucky enough to smoke.' For the interviewed young people, the need to make money is part of neoliberal

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[5] Six million a month is an obvious underestimation of the salary.

demands 'to produce oneself as a subject of value' (Allen and Mendick 2013, p. 77). To Skeggs and Loveday, the potency of money in shaping young people's sense of worth reflects the struggle for value of 'those who live intensified devaluation in the new conditions […] by which the self is required to repeatedly reveal its value through its accrual and investment in economic, symbolic, social and cultural capitals' (2012, p. 472). It is, thus, not contradictory that lower working prospects (and incomes, for that matter) are associated with consumption ambitions (Leonini 2017; Winlow and Hall 2013).

Ultimately, one cannot go without noting how VET schools help reproduce a cultural change in regard to what education means and what its purposes should be. They do so by promoting a discourse that validates education by its capacity to lead to jobs *tout court*. By and large, the schools included in the fieldwork seemed to be environments highly centred on the value of learning for earning. The progression routes to high school and higher education were rarely put forward: from the policy discourses on VET, to media and school leaflets distributed for recruitment. Exceptions[6] were only when schools had a strategic interest in forming high school classes. And, nevertheless, many young people apply for VET because of poor academic records and because there the enrolment lasts one year less than in high school. Especially for the young men, VET seemed to be used as a 'front'—in the sense discussed in Goffman—for the performance of masculinity. To them, the progression routes to high school and tertiary education go against the very rationale for being in VET, that is, to get a job fast and make money.

Fast employability was, invariably, the VET flagship. Moreover, the monthly scholarship[7] (unprecedented in Romania's education and subject of attendance) also infused an early 'employment mind-set'. Thus, young people may come to school 'for the money they get' or, in an

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[6] As the number of students finishing VET is usually insufficient for forming a high school class (grade 11) class, schools prefer not to include young people finishing VET in the high school classes (the so called 'progress route'). A major deterrent is the risk of decreasing the (the already fragile) *baccalaureate* admission rates.

[7] The equivalent of €45 monthly (with the exception of holidays).

ultimate scenario, very few may drop out in favour of a job that pays more. Against this background, it is predictable that young people do not trade the prospects of employment (read: earning) for the continuation of schooling (without scholarship and with uncertain end points). At times, when an alluring 'taste of money' meets the normative value of education, confusion arises:

| Dan [weighing up the options for next years]: | But I've been talking to other guys and I can say I'm gonna work, cause if I get the taste of money I find it hard to get back to school cause I get the taste of money, but who knows …maybe I'm going to get bored of so much work and I will say at some point that I want to go to college… |
|---|---|
| Andrei: | You never know … |
| Dan: | …what life brings. No school, no future. (Focus group, grade 10, mechanics class, small town) |

A century after Dewey's argument that vocational education 'should not be for the sake of industries—but for the sake of citizenship' (1913, p. 101), it may be that the perceived role of education changed deeply: for VET schools and for the young people themselves. This research suggests that for the interviewed young people, VET is a short road to the world of work. They want to focus on practice and perceive the 'academic' disciplines as a useless load. Many have a very instrumental, close to utilitarian view on VET. They internalized the potent rhetoric that sees liberal and vocational education as either/or choices. A question rises on the actual ways vocational education can infuse social and humanistic values in the process of learning a trade, as VET schools started to function as 'marketable' entities, promising to deliver swift employability. As argued in Giroux, education is instrumental in promoting neoliberalism by producing 'consumer-based notions of agency […] while simultaneously instrumentalizing all forms of knowledge' (Giroux 2013, p. 161). From this perspective, VET schools are at the core of promoting neoliberalism.

Ultimately, one cannot go without noticing how the advantages young people (and staff, for that matter) attribute to VET are actually the type of 'benefits' that are generally refused to the academic education at the high school level: pocket money and financial stability for independent living. VET 'marketing' is actually built on the limitations the liberal education carries *for some*. When at stake are disadvantaged young people, the role of VET schools in the social reproduction comes to the fore. By focusing on the immediate gains through employment, VET teachers reinforce young people's short-termism, at the expense of developing more strategic positions over what may be possible to achieve. Marketing VET via the language of employability fails to instil in young people the inclination for lifelong learning, or towards gaining higher qualifications. Young people seem to have rather narrow conceptions over the occupational spectrum, with very few accounts referring to the mid-level positions. At the end of the day, this view over employment possibilities seems to reflect the hourglass economy itself: with a decreasing number of mid-level positions squeezed in between the growing strata of low paid unskilled jobs and the upper strata of professionals. Ultimately, many VET schools in Romania fortify this view of the economy, albeit involuntarily and with best intentions.

## Precarious Work as Experimentation

Although not common, a sense of experimentation through VET seemed very compelling in several interviews, mainly with girls. Many interviewees took horizontal mobility as choice/exploration and preferred the precarious jobs in services to the option of employment in conventional industrial settings. Besides, few yet insightful accounts positioned migration in relation to exploration, adventure and indulgence with middle-class consumption models. This part comments on young people's 'fascination' with change (and instability?) which is theoretically intriguing and able to reflect an increasing cultural influence of delaying 'adult' commitments (Amit 2011). It corroborates anecdotal evidence in order

to argue that one should not deny young people in VET the same drive towards exploration that their middle-class peers indulge in via volunteering, gap years, travelling and so on. It suggests that a culture that prioritizes change at the expense of stability starts to be seen even in 'socially remote' places as VET.

In a small focus group with three young men in VET textile, the following options for the future were discussed as 'possibilities': working at a local automotive manufacturing company ('at the cable'), working abroad in 'constructions or at a bar', work in a bakery, as a waiter, in tailoring or as a football player. Elsewhere, asked if they would deem feasible the idea of operating an industrial sewing machine at a local manufacturing company producing car upholstery, several young men in a VET tourism class argued that 'it all depends on the salary' and that 'it might worth giving a try', to see *how* they 'can manage'. Whilst moving from a sector to another may not be something new (although the scale of the phenomenon definitely is), we found young people's confidence in their capacity to carry out a job remote from the area of initial training bewildering.

However, one has to admit that the labour market unfolds such a large variety of precarious jobs young people can do—regardless their previous education—that the 'options' they imagine may hold a certain dose of realism. The labour market is such that a young person, for instance, can work—with minimal in-house training—in a large variety of places. And young people internalized the idea that the labour market (precarious as it may be) is for them to explore and to move from one place to another until they find the 'perfect fit'. One cannot go without noting that the sense of experimentation and confidence in their capacity 'to manage' actually helps build the premises for horizontal mobility and reliance on in-house short-term training, both characteristics of a precarious economy. Ultimately, organizations' cultures highly focused on recruitment and celebration of one's *potential* ability rather than past achievement (Sennett 2004) maintain this sense of entitlement. As elsewhere, horizontal mobility replaces on-the-job progression, albeit with an image of advancement.

In a neoliberal understanding of self-management, interviewed young people may take horizontal mobility as exploration. See, for instance, the account of a 16-year-old girl in a VET hospitality area:

Ana:    Honestly I wouldn't [apply for a job in one of the training place-ment firms] … I would like something else too. 'Cause I can say that I'm not a very static person to keep with a job. I cannot do that… I like new things, I want to learn many things and I need to experiment a lot. (Ana, grade 10, tourism and alimentation class, small town)

Or:     Yes, [joinery] is interesting, but it's more of a curiosity we have […] I love things that are more exciting, extravagant, so to speak. (Laura, grade 10, joinery class, municipality city)

For some, the sense of experimentation was highly gendered, in terms of access to a social life otherwise refused. This is how a Roma girl from the countryside describes her decision to become a waitress:

| Silvia [with excitement, speaking on behalf of her and two other close colleagues]: | Right: VET! It lasts only 3 years! We'll finish sooner! It shouldn't be that hard! We'll not do a lot of Math, not much Romanian, either. Good life! Nice and easy. We'll be waitresses, we'll go, serve people, meet new folks…. (Silvia, grade 10, tourism and alimentation class, small town) |

Girls and boys alike appeared eager to capitalize on their capacity to (re) produce affective atmospheres, or sensations of ease and enjoyment, very much in line with the argument of Farrugia et al. (2018). The way they take for granted the embodied nature of service work, further sub-stantiates the potency of youth subjectivities in the hospitality sector. Interestingly enough (yet, well aligned with the neoliberal celebration of the present), interviewees did not seem to acknowledge the short-termism of their prospects. For instance, there was no hint during interviews that the work in the service economy they cheerfully embraced may hardly be reconciled with childbearing, older age, poor health and so on.

To be sure, the large majority of accounts suggested a preference for conventional occupational trajectories, despite the absence of enabling labour market circumstances. Yet, the active search for change by some young people in VET reflects the diffusion downwards of the characteristics Standing attributed to the 'proficians': an emerging group of expert-technicians, working on contract, who 'live with the expectation and desire to move around, without an impulse for long-term, full-time employment in a single enterprise' (2011, p. 8). As Standing's *proficians* are situated at a much higher level of qualification, the presence of similar tendencies among young people in VET cannot be but disconcerting.

Importantly, however, young people seemed open to carry out some precarious jobs, but not others. For instance, they would welcome work in retail or hospitality, yet not in textile, in constructions or at an assembly line. The difference that matters seems to be one of degree of social life the job entails and its urban, modern outlook. This may explain young people's favourable stance over the prospects of doing (precarious) jobs, yet in environments perceived as dynamic, youthful and so on. For instance, a young Roma man (19, from foster care) in a textile class of a small town works part time in the kitchen of a local restaurant. His account about the (otherwise unremarkable) municipality city has a disproportionate focus on its' 'metropolitan', consumption-centred facade:

> When I enter Tg Mures and see the poster: *Welcome to Tg Mures*, and I pass through the flag above the road and I see KFC there and all these new places near the railway station, from that very moment I feel like everything changes inside me…I feel like the atmosphere changes and my mindset changes…it's like…I feel like I drop off my dirty clothes from [his native city] and I take my clean, white Tg Mures clothes! (Robert, grade 11, textile class, small town)

This seductive city-image is associated with distorted views about the employment prospects there. For instance, Robert considers one can be a chef at KFC, although he would not mind even a cleaning job there, which—according to him—pays far better than his current kitchen job. Besides the obvious core-periphery issues, Robert's account speaks about

the potency of new commercialism in informing young people's occupational choices. In a different context, a teacher from a VET school complained that two former students resigned secure positions at a major chemical plant in order to work as shelf-stockers at a nearby Mall:

> They [the chemical plant] took 10 pupils to become Electricians. They were even hired as Electricians. After the training, induction and when the papers were done, they moved across the road, to the Mall. To place chips on the shelf. They earn 100-200 RON less, but no responsibilities! Gossiping, music, they give and get a 'like' on Facebook. That's the problem with this generation! It's not money that matters, but running away from responsibilities. To have an easy life. No thinking about tomorrow. But life will catch up with them… (Teacher, electricity school, municipality city)

Interviewed employers also complained about new entrants' 'poor work ethic' and weak commitment, a situation at odds with young people's 'grand narrative' on loyalty and on doing work well 'for its own sake' (Sennett 2008, p. 90). According to the interviewed managers and the recruitment staff from SMEs, firms in services handle a 60% turnover rate, with only 30–40% of new entrants remaining beyond six months. Employers stated young people leave for arguably trivial reasons: a minor salary increase at another company, small benefits (a company phone, equipment) or when they disagree with restrictions related to smoking time or the use of the telephone during working hours. Some argued that young people are interested in minimal effort and low responsibility, a combination that cannot match several industries where craftsmanship ranks high.

One such example is the leather gloves manufacturing in Transylvania. Despite a local 200 years tradition, one of the very few remaining producers considers reducing the scale of the enterprise, once the current employees reach retirement age. According to the enterprise owner, young people treated with reserve any recruitment process, whilst the new entrants demonstrated minimal willingness to learn. According to the interview, it takes five years until a worker reaches the proficiency level, the production requires extreme precision and patience, all 'hard to find' ingredients when—according to the business owner—the option of working in retail with modest responsibility ranks high:

There are at least 10 operations done on a single glove. If you stitch one wrong, the hole remains there. There is nothing you can do. But if you work in a hypermarket: you wander around the shelves all day. If you cannot say to a client where the dried cereals are, you can just say you are from another department. No worries, no responsibilities. And you still get a decent salary at the end. (Owner, leather glove manufacturing)

To the young people in VET, the world of consumption exerts an alluring image both when clients and when prospective employees. Indeed, youthfulness sells better: even job advertisements are teen-targeted in ways that resonate with the profile of a metropolitan young employee, without commitments and major financial constraints.[8] Given the culture of trouble-free consumption and happiness, embodied in the shopping mall, it is little wonder that young people prefer it to the option of working in a chemical plant or in a gloves manufacturing workshop. To substantiate the difference: according to interviewed engineers at the chemical plant, the mean age there is over 50, the procedures highly standardized, the hierarchies of power are age related, the equipment (with minor chances prompted by 'façade environmental concerns') dates back to the 1960s and the overall environment highly noxious. The work in a glove workshop is not less discouraging because of its highly meticulous nature, reduced advancement possibilities and the aging work community.

The above accounts open several agendas for inquiry in relation to young people in the service economy. As argued in Farrugia et al. (2018), there is, first, a problem with the role of youth subjectivities remaining unacknowledged, as youthfulness is part and parcel of the new service economy. This appears to be especially the case of those interacting with clients in the hospitality/food and beverage sector. Also, questions are raised about those 'others' not able to meet the metropolitan, youthful standards demanded by such jobs: young people from rural areas and the socially disadvantaged for whom the 'affective labour' involves high emotional costs, the older workers, those with family obligations interested in

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[8] See, for instance, the recent ironical job advertisements of a major retailer in Romania: *Would you like a job for some extra pocket money? Would you like a job for getting money for the afterwork party?*

full-time 'proper' jobs. Ultimately, a question arises on how/if the few remnants of industrial production (i.e. the chemical plant in point) can/should be made more 'youth-friendly'.

One cannot speak about young people's sense for exploration without discussing its relationship with migration. By and large, interviewees incorporated migration in a strategy of 'self-realization' back home. Given the strong culture of home ownership,[9] it was nothing new to hear young people speaking at length about migration as connected to work, housing back home and family formation.[10] But there were also several instances where migration seemed decoupled from a 'material' project. These atypical, thought-provoking accounts positioned migration in relation to exploration, adventure and indulgence with middle-class consumption models. For several interviewed girls, it was part of a process of delaying 'adult' commitments (Amit 2011), a suspension of adult roles and statuses.

Previous research documented this tendency for upper middle-class young people: the 'gap-year' practice in volunteering (Simpson 2004) or Arnett's emerging adults 'roleless role' (2000). The argument was that taking some time off from various social commitments and pressures is a middle-class luxury refused to those growing up in poverty, who take on adult responsibilities earlier in life (Kendig et al. 2014). Indeed, as the employability discourse goes, young people in VET receive the message they are trained for a work trajectory, remote from 'superfluous' issues such as self-exploration, experimentation that may only delay their 'entry into work'. Thus, hearing some of those in VET talking about the possibility to travel, see new places, take some 'time off' was rather counterintuitive:

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[9] Romania has the highest homeownership rate in the EU (98.2%), but also the highest rate of severe housing deprivation (23% compared to 5.2% cf. Housing Europe Observatory 2015). As much as 52.3% of population lives in overcrowded houses (Eurostat 2014), and in some rural areas basic amenities are missing. Explanations for the high home ownership are related to the massive privatization of apartments in the 1990s, to the large rural population, but—in author's opinion—also to the strong sense of insecurity people experience in many other areas of their lives and in relation to the state (employment, healthcare, welfare support). The provision of social housing is extremely low (1.5% of the total housing stock cf. Housing Europe Observatory 2015), has very long waiting lists and is available only in extreme situations.

[10] 'Ideally', for many, migration is supposed to end once these 'prerequisites' of a decent life are met.

Sandra:   Even if some people say they [the employers abroad] don't respect the contract, that they try to cheat you, I wouldn't think so. Probably those people misunderstood, they picked up an enterprise that didn't…. […] I don't have anyone abroad. I just want a new experience, a new country, to see civilization in other countries, to see what people's mentality is like, to see how they cook […] It's another way to work, there are other rules, everything is different from what you've learned here. There you have to adapt to something new, to something you may never have lived. (Sandra, grade 10, public alimentation class, small town)

In a focus group with boys, some consensus was built around the advantages of short-term relocation abroad in comparison with a job involving commuting back home. The reasons were also related to the sense of novelty: 'to see the world. After a while you are tired of the same city, the same blocks, the same homeless people. This way, you can see others as well' (electricity class, major city). In the same logic, many young people envision working in transportation, as international lorry drivers: 'you see the world and you are getting paid for this!' However, consistent with the distaste for gradual progression to the top, they reject the idea of working as local truck drivers first.

Young people's relationships with the idea of going abroad are more complex, however. Many interviewees cherished touristic travelling and strongly rejected migration due to anticipated nationalistic feelings in Europe or the perceived high social/emotional costs of migration:

Virgil:   Never. I never thought about going … on vacation, to know, to see places, yes! […] I'd like to go and visit, but not to live there. Not to live and work there, cause I heard from many that Romanians outside are seen…Romanians are seen very badly and …

Flaviu[11]:    It depends on behaviour, it depends also on how … I mean, not necessarily. If you go there and they see you're ok… Some of them are… indeed, some have a fixation with this, exactly like here with the Roma. Some Romanians have a problem with the Roma. But…well…I think one shouldn't bother with these people. (Focus group, grade 10, public alimentation class, city)

For Adi, a young boy in an electricity class, the drive for exploration is paralleled by a weakened capacity to master the trade (he even declares he does not know what the name of his field: 'electrotechnist' means). Initially in high school, he transferred to VET because of his very poor academic record (probably combined with some behaviour problems) and the shorter duration of schooling. He applied to the Electrical VET following his father's advice: himself marginally familiar with the trade, yet enough to notice 'it is well paid and nice.' Adi is now deeply aware that 'VET didn't teach [him] a thing' and that his prospects of working in the trade are null. Yet, he confesses 'he likes money' and 'he has a dream: to make himself a future, to start doing something big', that is, to start working. But beforehand, he intends to spend some time in Italy, where his mother works.[12] After that, he plans to work in constructions back home. To him, migration is unrelated to work and work back home unrelated to VET.

For Eliza, the only girl in a VET construction class in a large city, migration is linked to work for travelling. She intends to get a temporary job in agriculture abroad: 'binge work' that brings cash in hand. However, in a counterbalance with the seasonal work (which has a very bad reputation in Romania) she plans to travel in exotic destinations. Eliza lives in a city with exorbitant housing prices, where the chances for a skilled worker to purchase an apartment (even if migrating) are extremely low. She knows too well that the only indicators of status for her may come

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[11] Flaviu recently repatriated from Italy where he lived for more than ten years and seems aware at the risks of oversimplifying complexity.
[12] Her own status abroad seems, however, precarious as the boy, like many others, did not visit her yet.

from consumption. Saving is futile; the self becomes the site of the best (and single) investment:

I:        How do you see yourself in a few years, Eliza?

Eliza:   Well, I don't know … At any case, not in Romania.

I:        You have plans to go abroad. What do you see yourself doing there?

Eliza:   I don't really know what I'm gonna do, but … I have somebody there […] Maybe picking fruits … I don't know … It's seasonal.

Dan:     That's for three months … What do you think, that streets are paved with gold, over there?

Eliza:   The niece of my mom's boyfriend went the same way, and she travelled all over the place. She earned a lot. And she went…where did she go? …in Egypt…where else….She took a holiday of that kind. She was in jungle; she did scuba diving, with the money she saved.

Dan:     But let's think a bit. How long did she stay?

Eliza:   I don't know.

Teo:     How much did she get? Look, I have a friend who went to England … And he earns well, I can't say he doesn't. He comes home and in two weeks he doesn't have a penny.

Eliza:   Well, she doesn't have time. She's single.

Teo:     Well, he's single, too. Look, I have a friend, for example, he went on a cruise ship for eight months. He won 200 million [lei] and something. He came back. In two months he had no money left.

Dan:     Well, if he went drinking with pals…

Teo:     No, man! Just to go and buy stuff for your house, what you need in the house. What do you think money stays on trees?

Eliza:   But she, the money she worked for, she made herself a holiday. So … she doesn't come home, only once or twice a year.

Teo:     And I don't think she earned more than you can get on a cruise ship […] I have a friend abroad working in constructions for 8 years. He still has to save awful lot to buy an apartment here. (Focus group, grade 10, constructions class, major city)

Previous research indicated that shopping responds to individuals' need to find consolation for the miseries of employment and to create a niche of enjoyment that compensates for the alienating experience of

work (Bauman 2001; Soper 2008; Gorz 1967 cf. Frayne 2016). Eliza commodifies precarious work abroad for a touristic project otherwise refused to a low-skilled worker in Romania. Consumption involves a powerful element of compensation and choice; Eliza embraces the idea of being able to choose. This would help ease her discontent with her work-related status and confirm to herself (and to others) she is much more than the work she has to do. After all, she is a resilient urban girl who sees no reason in declining herself an exotic vacation. Her choice calls for social recognition. By the 'investment in herself', Eliza seems to be the female correspondent of Leonini's male interviewees who 'exalt consumption and the inability to save, given the field of possibilities and constraints open to them' (2017). Ultimately, her rejection of future links with Romania become part and parcel of her 'social identity of choice' (the 'do-it-yourself biography' cf. Beck 1992, 1994).

The above examples show that young people in VET display more complex social worlds than commonly assumed in the employability discourse. As argued in Stahl, 'as long as the discourse of aspiration relies on the proxies of education and occupation', the young working-class boys (and girls, for that matter) 'will always be defined as having low or modest aspirations' (2014, p. 90). However, when expanding the meanings of aspirations in ways that account for young people's own definitions of 'good life', more variegated notions of aspiration are likely to emerge. This research seems to suggest that for the young people in Romania's VET, engagement with popular culture, consumption and the suspension of adult commitments are important areas of 'identity play' (Allen and Mendick 2013).

Although probably to a lesser extent than their high school urban peers, urban young people from VET relate and use celebrity culture in order to imagine themselves in a social world of choice (see girls' overwhelming tendency to delay motherhood, sometimes to imagine themselves as fashion designers and boys' scattered ideas of becoming football players or bodyguards). Whilst the potency of such imagined trajectories comes to the surface very rarely, and mostly in the major cities, it is important, however, to retain their theoretical significance when challenging the invariable link between VET and employability alone. Young people's social worlds are far more complex. Ultimately, recognizing this may open up novel, non-judgemental ways of relating to celebrity culture

and middle-class practices as analytical tools for understanding young people's unsolved tensions with an unsatisfying present.

## The Entrepreneurial Self: On Prudence and Risk Aversion

The literature on VET has an obvious bias towards employment. The notion of work is often limited to the dyad employment/unemployment, which leaves unexamined a diversity of working experiences such as entrepreneurship. Do young people in Romania's VET envision an entrepreneurial trajectory? Not really. Their accounts seem rather normative, very conservative. Despite the policy focus on youth initiatives, entrepreneurial endeavours seem rather remote from those now in VET. It was rare for the interviewees to speak about an entrepreneurial intention, unprompted. Yet, as confirmed by large-scale statistics, provided 'favourable circumstances', they would 'not exclude' this possibility at a certain moment in life (especially via a migration project).

But young people rarely see their working identities as fixed. The divide employment versus entrepreneurship does not hold, as many (especially young men from VET mechanics, plumbing, constructions), explore the possibility of having a secure workplace and informal entrepreneurship on the side. This is, in Romania, very much part of the grey economy that allows manual workers to simultaneously occupy different positions and have a higher competitive advantage. We argue in favour of understanding young people's volatile entrepreneurial intentions as an expression of and reaction to a precarious labour market. The entrepreneurial avenues they contemplate are closer to solo-self-employment and 'entrepreneurship by necessity', than to 'entrepreneurship by choice' or to Schumpeter's notion of 'creative destruction'. Besides, their reserve in following exclusively an entrepreneurial avenue supports the idea that employment still holds the promise of security and predictability.

There are many fields that allow for fluid combinations or overlapping identities. For instance a young person with background in hospitality may be hired informally for serving at weddings and events, a mechanic may do odd jobs such as small reparations and a plumber

may 'just get a toolbox and starts earning'. Young people's need to rely on self-secured, independent work commitments is accompanied by some intuition that their long-term prospects are deeply unsecure:

| | |
|---|---|
| Dan: | I have a friend who finished VET….well, long ago. He lives three houses down the road from me. And because of VET, he has an awful load of assignments. And to put it bluntly, he puts bread on the table! |
| I: | Here, in Romania? |
| Dan: | Yes, yes! He gets assignments all over the country! And he does not have a firm. He's moonlighting, let's say that. |
| Laurentiu: | moonlighting… |
| I: | What do you think is more important to have a job with an employer or to work on your own? |
| Dan: | It is better to work on your own, but to be known, to have people searching for you. |
| Laurentiu: | On your own. |
| Dan: | Exactly. |
| Laurentiu: | No one gives you orders … |
| George: | To be legal, with papers. To be in good standing with everything. If you do moonlight, you did nothing. |
| Sebastian: | I think it's best to work for an employer because we have a work card, and … when we're old, we'll have a pension, when we'll not be able to work anymore. |
| I: | Aha… |
| Dan [ironical]: | Common…retirement … You will not have any pension, trust me. (Focus group, grade 10, plumbing class, small town) |

Working in the grey economy (mainly as informal solo-self entrepreneurs)versus having a secure workplace was a matter of high controversy. At stake was the imagined incapacity of the state to provide pensions, a major public concern in Romania. The overwhelming majority of those who (when asked) considered it likely to start a business, seemed, however, inclined to postpone entrepreneurship until feeling confident in the trade and until able to secure (usually by migration) the seed money. Almost invariably, young people's views on entrepreneurship (in the rare

occasions when this emerged), was as a backup to employment, which received prominence. See, for instance, the following fragment from a focus group with boys in their last year of VET (public alimentation). Despite being aware at a success story of an entrepreneur who built up a large-scale transport firm, they imagine replicating the initiative, yet without being able to leave the employment schema:

I:      Do you have in mind people whom you think they have a good job?

David:  Well, I know a guy. I think it's a bit stressful, he has a firm. And it has over 10 trucks, I think, across Europe. And it's a little stressful if something happens to some of the trucks, on the road, or if a truck and cannot deliver the cargo, then he's in trouble […] First of all, it was very hard to build that company. They started with trucks and in the first months, in the first year he had two or three trucks. But today they have over 100 trucks working across Europe and around the world, I think. And it was very hard to build that company.

I:      So I understand that a good job, if it is to infer from what you say, is actually not so much a place where you go as an employee but it is the place you create as a head of business.

David:  Yes. Yes. Well, that's the safest job, I guess. You control everything, and you tell that man what to do and you know your company is in safe hands.

I:      But isn't there too much stress and risk?

David:  Yes. You do not give up your job, you keep it like you keep the firm. Cause a firm can always dissolve. But at the same time you have to make sure you have enough orders, that things run smoothly, cause you can go bankrupt with …
        But if it really is to be your trade, you don't just go bankrupt, I think. (Focus group, grade 10, public alimentation class, major city)

This research identified a single setting where young people seemed inclined to believe one does not need employment experience in order to start a business. This was the situation of several young people in a construction VET in one of Romania's major cities. Despite not feeling very

confident in 'mastering the trade', the interviewees appeared to rely on the examples of older peers who established small construction teams. Importantly, they seemed to discredit both the idea of learning a trade and the VET certification (by declaring they are in school because 'they have to' or because of being underage). To them, one such 'entrepreneur' needs persuasion skills (which they have), a van and several 'recruits' to do the work they secure. A troubling urban saying was recurrent in their accounts: 'Three things matter in life: the air, the water and the fool [to deceive].' They appeared convinced that in a city with a booming construction sector (including a large grey market), the leap to a status that is much different from the current one is very likely.

Positions of this kind, although very rare in this research, are relevant as they point to a larger mind-set that challenge the value of education and the ethics of hard work. These attitudes are, nevertheless, present in other cultural spaces (e.g. being a 'streetwise' person in a Western city ghetto). However, Romania has a different story to tell, linked to the communist period that rendered derisory the achievement by hard-work and proposed short-term solutions to making ends meet and 'to get on'. Communism interfered with the previous work (and entrepreneurial) ethic of postponing gratification, which valued progression through hard work ('practice makes perfect') and integrity. Residuals of its' troubled 'value system' are still present and add a (neo)classical economic layer according to which 'work is a disutility' (Verdon 1996 cf. Winch 2013, p. 93).

But the alluring neoliberal image of entrepreneurship did not seem to have reached those in VET to the extent one may imagine. With the rare exceptions above, even when they seem interested in an entrepreneurial avenue, young people did not display the same appetite for risk and tolerance for failure that seems implied in tech entrepreneurship, for instance (Pantea 2018). They adopted a rather conservative stance by favouring business partnerships with a close family member (if at all). No interviewee spoke about disruptive entrepreneurship. Instead, small-scale, imitative initiatives predominated (e.g. a hairdressing saloon, an ABC store, an auto-mechanics shop and solo-self-employment). They seemed to display high risk aversion, especially related to low trust in banks and the changing state regulations (e.g. concerns over shifting political

conditions, financial instability and fluctuating rules). Together with migration, entrepreneurship provided one of the very few windows that opened young people's narratives towards more structural concerns, otherwise very rarely articulated.

<p align="center">*    *    *</p>

This chapter analysed the neoliberal rhetorical tropes present in young people's modes of imagining their future. Interviewees oscillated between a deep awareness they were not born with unlimited choices and a seductive belief that it is within their own power to become whatever they wanted to be. The notion that one is the doer and the undoer of his/her destiny was a cross-cutting theme. It was supported by the idea of 'having ambition', yet without their fictional goals being able to mobilize action. As young people did not seem to question their own precarization, one can risk the conclusion that they broadly resonate with the neoliberal project that celebrates instability as freedom. However, as the next chapter will unfold, there seems to be a certain level of awareness that 'things will not work out' as imagined.

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# 7

# Low Expectations

This chapter deals with young people's apprehension that their expectations may prove volatile, if not erroneous. It expands on the level of necessity or the views grounded in the deep realization that the actual prospects that unfold are more constraining than enabling. The chapter presents as 'low expectations' a rather deeply held, tacit, hard-to-unpack set of anxieties over declining prospects. Most of the times, young people touched upon their concerns very late in the interviews. When they did, a sense of reserve and hesitation was present. There was often something different and special about those voicing their concerns about the future. They displayed broader societal awareness, had a capacity to view structures and to interpret one's possibilities through broader lenses. Without establishing statistical correlations, we feel, however, that the 'low expectations' were more likely to be articulated by the young people with a closer engagement with the disturbing consequences of precarious work: either a personal history of informal work, a parent with a work-related injury, friends in 'dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs', or a thought-provoking family crisis. Young people's 'low expectations' resonate with the notion of 'social gravity'. As developed by Ghassan, it helps us understand 'how young people are pushed and pulled in certain directions

while reflexively understanding the 'gravity' of their situation' (Ghassan 2011 cf. Threadgold 2017).

## The Disillusionment. Or Changing a *Precarity* for Another

This section revolves around young people's realization that the legitimate 'avenues for advancing a meaningful life' seem blocked (Standing 2011, p. 19). First, it discusses the unanticipated finding that many interviewees refuse the very idea of making plans. It interprets these views as simultaneously a product of and a reaction to an unpredictable environment. The refusal to plan is taken as an indication of young people's deep awareness at their own fragility. Many interviewees seem to lack a sense of identity linked to work, and also any sensible prospects of developing one. Their absence of direction and their weak capacity to determine 'what they are good at' (one of the two goals of VET[1]) seem to configure the very opposite of 'vocation'. The section is drawing on young people's awareness that employment prospects at home are unreasonable and that despite the rhetoric of VET and craftsmanship, they do not master the trade. Migration seems a temporary answer for arriving at a financial equilibrium back home. It resonates with a way of governance that puts the onus of making a living 'here or there' on individuals alone and removes any expectations for the state to deliver anything.

Standing (2011) argued that *the Precariat* is angry because of the frustration for seeing the avenues for advancing a meaningful life blocked. Because of 'chronic insecurity', *the Precariat* cannot see their jobs as a route to identity, dignity and pride. Ultimately, a sense of anomie installs: it is a 'feeling of passivity born of despair', that is, a lack of prospects and the realization that no escape to a better life is possible (Standing 2011, p. 20). The interviewed young people rarely experienced precarious work themselves, yet some appeared to foresee its signs. They moved back and forth between the aspiration for a well-paid and predictable occupational

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[1] cf. Dewey (1916).

trajectories and the crude realization that they are excluded from what seems to be 'the opportunity' of decent work for decent pay.

Referring to the importance of class in shaping individuals' relationship with the future, Sennett argued that instant gratification and short-term planning are luxuries disadvantaged groups cannot afford:

> Here class counts for everything. A child of privilege can afford strategic confusion, a child of the masses cannot. Chance opportunities are likely to come to the child of privilege because of family background and educational networks; privilege diminishes the need to strategize. Strong, extensive human networks allow those at the top to dwell in the present; the networks constitute a safety net which diminishes the need for long-term strategic planning. The new elite thus has less need of the ethic of delayed gratification, as thick networks provide contacts and a sense of belonging, no matter what firm or organization one works for. The mass, however, has a thinner network of informal contact and support, and so remains more institution dependent. (2006, p. 80)

However, the current research seems to suggest that 'short term planning' (if at all) is the only exercise young disadvantaged people can actually engage in: 'big plans, big problems', as argued in an interview. When asked about the far future, a sense of lost control becomes predominant: 'Whatever will be, will be….' Previous longitudinal research in Romania among young people also indicated that those in VET reported 'less in-depth occupational exploration, less identification with present vocational commitments, and more flexibility and self-doubt about their careers' (Negru-Subțirica et al. 2015, p. 131).

Interview questions avoided starting from the assumption that young people *have* plans. We created an environment where both the idea of having a plan and the refusal of making a plan, were legitimate. However, it soon emerged that young people were very reserved in engaging with the mere possibility of making plans. The citation below is typical for those rejecting the idea of a plan altogether:

I:        Some say it is not good to make plans in life, because today, things are changing very quickly. Others, say it is good to have a plan. How would you say, it's better?

| Paul: | Never to make plans, because they don't materialize. |
| Cristian: | No. No plans. |
| Mihai: | Me too. It happened to me to make a plan which didn't turn out right. Many times. Since then, I said, there will be no plans. |
| I: | Well, imagine you are in one year time and you finish school. What would you do? |
| Paul: | I don't know…I would wait a bit. Cause I don't finish at 18, but at 17. So, I'd have to stay one year at home. So, I cannot really answer the question. |
| I: | So you would stay at home until turning 18. What about you? |
| Cristian: | Well, I don't know what I'd do…Never thought of that. (Focus group, grade 10, constructions class, city) |

'Reasons' for the refusal of planning were many: from superstitions ('All the time I make a plan, something goes wrong, so I dropped this idea altogether') to high levels of uncertainty (e.g. frequent changes in legislation and the disappearance of some firms). Interestingly, however, in several situations, young men rejected with a certain level of ostentation, the idea of planning, as 'who knows? Maybe we'll die.' The source of such an unpredictable occurrence was thought provoking. It is impossible to point to a single 'basis' for this reaction, which may go from family socialization, to 'learned helplessness' or a preference for avoiding the question. By analysing the youth cultures of those in VET, we tend to believe, however, that a cultural model of masculinity—risk—death nexus may play a role. According to this stance, 'the world' is the arena for 'acting on the edge', where individuals' capacity is stretched and manhood is hardened. Interviewees seemed to resemble Leonini's interviewees, for whom 'becoming a man means learning to "get by" every day, to cope with uncertain and precarious living and working conditions' (2017, p. 66). They also value traditional adulthood (as they use, at times, the language of 'conventional aspirations'), yet they 'are keen to stress that becoming adult means acquiring the awareness that "every day could be your last"' (Leonini 2017, p. 66).

Another reason given for having no plans may be age related. Several interviewees—especially in big cities—argued that they may probably prolong until turning 18 their entry into work. Although employment is

legal[2] from the age of 16, still the age of 18 seems to be an important benchmark. Sometimes employers are more reserved in hiring workers younger than 18, as there are certain legal requirements meant to protect younger workers from exploitation (shorter working hours, longer breaks, type of work, etc.). For those intending to 'stay around', 'take a break' or 'wait' until turning 18, the interval left is close to a limbo: there are no social expectations attached, no clear roles to be filled. The absence of clear social functions for their age phase makes the status of young people finishing VET close to one of the 'emerging adults'. Arnett, described this period as the 'roleless role' due to the absence of clear 'role requirements' (Arnett 2000). The young people finishing VET cannot meet the educational expectations usually attributed to people of their age, while employment is hardly one below 18. And, at odds with Arnett's theory, they are not middle class.

What is more, the absence of obvious commitments derived from adult roles makes young people position the recourse to precarious work as mere caprice. It was very rare for the interviewees to admit doing precarious work to make the ends meet. The reasons put forward were often one's need for money 'to spend', that is, fancy choice, an extravagance they indulge in by virtue of their complex (urban) personalities. As the need for instant gratification ranks high, precarious work comes as a negligible (yet necessary) adagio. Ovidiu, for instance, studies VET electricity without feeling confident in his knowledge of the trade. Over the summer, he worked in constructions: a type of work that young people know they could undertake anyway, but which is demanding and does not usually attach a sense of pride:

> Ovidiu:   Because I like to have money, I do not care about what kind of work I do. I'm interested to know that I work. I care about nothing else. Over the summer, I used to work from 8 to 7 or 8 in the evening. And yes, I made 270 RON[3] in three days. (Ovidiu, grade 10, electricity class, city)

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[2] Fifteen with parental approval.

[3] The equivalent of €60.

In a plain example of false consciousness, binge work in manufacturing goes unquestioned, as young people share a sense of bitterness for not being among the 'selected few' doing extra hours (at the expense of health and personal life). Almost each company young people refereed to during interviews seemed to promote an example of an exceptionally hard-working and well-paid worker. His/her income was close to an urban legend for those contemplating, from the margins, the possibility of doing extra hours. For the interviewed young people, the sense of alienation coming from the 'feeling of being fooled' (Standing 2011, pp. 20–21) is not yet present:

Teo:        A cousin of mine worked at [Company Y] before and he earned nearly 30 millions.[4]
I:          Did he get 30 millions?
Teo:        He worked overtime, shifts.
I:          And how long can you go in this regime? With overtime, shifts…
Teo:        No, you only go when they call you, when they need it.
I:          Aaa, only when they call you. And then you come back on low pay, when there's not much work. And would you agree to work like that? Sometimes with intense periods, other times…
Horatiu:    Yes.
Teo:        Somehow not…
Horatiu:    Well, let's say it's intense. You work hard this week; then you have a break of two days and then again. But not that they leave you a year to work intensively all year long and then, back on the minimum wage. That's pointless, to tell you the truth.
I:          I see, but are there such situations? I mean, like Teo said: it may be that there are weeks when they have a big project and they need you.
Horatiu:    Indeed, but you cannot even rely on that. You are never sure they call you. It's not 100%. Cause in the factory there are many workers and they can work better than you. And of course they are calling in the best, not those… you know what I mean

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[4] Approximately €650.

| I: | I see. So not everybody has this chance to get to work hard. |
| Horatiu: | precisely. (Focus group, grade 10, public alimentation class, city) |

The possibilities to carry out 'episodic' or 'project' type of work provide a structural condition that maintains young people's hectic relationship with the labour market. A frequent concern among restaurant and hotel owners, for instance, seemed to be young people's tendency to work informally, for the wedding weekends. This type of 'binge work' allows young people to earn in a weekend half a monthly salary. Employers—who, on the one hand, take advantage of this 'reserve army' of occasional 'work force'—find its consequences for regular employment troubling. A similar pattern of episodic work (and idleness in between) is well established for their older peers doing seasonal/temporal work abroad.

Ultimately, young people seem cognisant that they will not enjoy the same social benefits as previous generations. See how a group of girls in textile VET (small town) negotiates the choices available, given several constraints they are fully aware of. Some would reject the draining effort of adapting to a new workplace while trying to approximate how the pension fund will be calculated. Monica seems aware that the pension crisis will render any effort for stability meaningless. Ana, who seems adamant to maintain a single workplace for securing a high pension, is, in the end, inclined to change a workplace for other reasons than income:

| I: | How many workplaces do you think you will have until you retire? |
| | [Sighs] |
| Maria: | We cannot know this. |
| I: | Let's think a little about your preferences. Would you like to have few jobs for longer periods of time or you would not mind having more jobs if… |
| Ana: | I'd like to have only one, because I think when I'm old, at retirement, I will have a higher pension. Because longer you work in a single place, more income adds up for the pension fund. |
| Elvira: | I'd prefer more places, because you learn from every place. |

| Ana: | Yes, but think that seniority is not adding up and you will have a small pension. |
|---|---|
| Maria: | It's hard for you to get adjusted to a work place after another. |
| Ana: | I'm thinking about my pension, if you do not think, I do. |
| Monica: | I don't think you'll reach retirement. |
| I: | Will not she be retired because…? |
| Monica: | Today's youth … Cause young people have to work for our parents to have a pension. But for us, who will work to have a pension? (Focus group, grade 10, textile class, small city) |

Often, interviewees were aware at disconcerting situations experienced by those employed: parents, relatives and friends. Many recalled abusive situations: a boss asking for a medical leave to be registered as an annual leave, or imposing unpaid extra hours at unconventional times. As several young people had their parents in early retirement because of work-related illness or disability, more grave inputs were also present. However, it came rather as a surprise that the accounts on work-related injustices were not accompanied by stronger critiques of the instable political situation. It may be that the condemnation of the present existed in absentia. By not articulating their discontent, young people refuse to engage with their sense of powerlessness, like in the following account:

| I: | Would you, however, think it would be possible for you to be unemployed in a few years' time? |
|---|---|
| George: | Yes |
| Dan: | Yeah yeah |
| George: | One can expect anything in this country. |
| Dan: | The country of all possibilities! |
| Paul: | You see that laws change from one day to the next, one law is passed; the other retreated, just like that! After all this, you do not know what to expect. |
| I: | What could go wrong? Beforehand you said there are unemployed people who do not want to work… |
| George: | To want to work, get a job, but maybe to get fired. As simple as that! |
| Dan: | We'll win the lottery instead! (Focus group, grade 11, mechanics class, small city) |

The interviewed young people refused to engage meaningfully with the uncomfortable prospects of unemployment and dismissed it lightly with a bizarre solution from above (i.e. winning the lottery). The idea of migrating is part of the same strategy of deferring a problem through reliance on ways out that escape linearity. For many interviewees, migration was not part of a plan, but a (yet viable) solution that met the same function: a refusal to engage with a complex and unsatisfactory reality back home. It also reflects the internalized expectation for individuals to secure solutions themselves, without reliance to state, trade unions, the justice system, banks and so on. Young people in VET seemed certain in regard to the need for a 'do it yourself biography' (Beck 1992, 1994).

Migration emerged as a special case of changing a precarity for another. In a similar way as the societies described by Narotzky and Besnier (2014), interviewed young people equate hope with movement in the belief that geographical mobility may translate into social mobility. Yet, for the groups analysed in Narotzky and Besnier, migration is a material projection into a future 'located somewhere else' (2014, p. 11). For the interviewed young people in Romania, migration is more instrumental in arriving to a financial equilibrium back home than a purpose in itself. They rarely 'dream' of leaving and their imagined trajectories are rarely one way. References to migration were almost always in reaction to the perceived impossibility of reaching the goals of a decent life at home. A 'revolving-door' model of migration seems a more adequate description than a view of mobility as an aspiration.

Migration meets some of the characteristic of Foucauldian heterotopia (Foucault 1971): it is simultaneously mental and physical; it is different and meets the function of an escape. It compensates for an uncomfortable labour market situation at home. For the interviewees, migration seems a 'parallel space' in that it eludes the boundary between acceptable and inacceptable work. This research put into light a widespread agreement among migrants and those contemplating migration that almost any work is acceptable abroad as long as it pays the money. For instance, Daniel, a boy in VET constructions class in a major city, argues that construction work 'is not his thing' and that 'he will not make a living from

this trade.' He plans to go to Ireland to an auntie and to work at a restaurant there for €1500. Then, he intends to work in constructions, 'but not too long and only for the money'. Finally, he intends 'to do what he really likes'. After some reserve, he confesses he dreams of working as a fashion model. By and large, the interviewees justified precarious work abroad by the prospects of earning a lot. Work in deterring conditions is accommodated as a choice driven by money:

| | |
|---|---|
| I: | If you have friends who went abroad, what did you learn from their stories? |
| Irina: | One can earn more than in Romania. |
| Laura: | That you need to have a stable place. |
| Ana: | Much better than here. |
| I: | Really? So you earn more, you need to have a stable place… |
| Iulia: | You need to know someone to take you there, you cannot just go. |
| I: | Yes. How are the conditions there? |
| Beatrice: | Worse. |
| Iulia: | If we are to think logically, when we go in any country, not necessarily nearby, everybody makes us Gypsies. |
| Beatrice: | I had a cousin who was in Germany and he worked in the rain with boots. Well, he earned money, but the conditions were … in the rain and overalls. |
| Ana [with a moralizing tone]: | You need money, you work. You don't need money you may very well stay home. |
| I: | Aha. Do you intend to go abroad? |
| Irina: | Yes. |
| Laura: | It depends… There, at least you know why you exhaust yourself for. |
| I: | But would it be possible to find something there in your field? |
| Laura: | I said I would not work in this job. |
| Irina: | Whatever comes. (Focus group, grade 10, textile class, town) |

But migration also influences young people's capacity to mobilize for securing a good job back home. When waiting for *the* phone call, they may temporary accept highly precarious work at home (or no work at all). Their accounts did not include any progress or clear articulation between the work at home and the one abroad. Both are disjointed and removed from young people's sense of 'calling': they see the provisory job at home as a back-up, an 'in-between type' of choice, while the job(s) abroad, not in the field of training satisfies some financial goals alone. In both instances, young people seem constrained to adopt an opportunistic stance to work: 'taking what comes', according to Standing (2011). Yet, occasionally, the prospects of migration emerged even among the young people enrolled in VET tracks leading to relatively well-paid jobs at home (plumbing, installations, welding and electricity).

At a different scale, VET itself becomes a waiting room for a migration project, as many interviewees seemed well aware that their status, options and dreams need to be dissociated from VET. Sometimes a sense of mutual complicity seemed inherent: young people appeared cognizant that they are not there for all the reasons usually attributed to VET, but simply because they 'had to be somewhere' (i.e. in a 'system'). The fact that this happens to be VET carries no further significance and reading the (occupational) lives through VET would be plainly erroneous:

Andrei:   Look, do you know what's the thing with the job? [with a clari-fying, implied tone] We do it as we are supposed to …have a school… I mean…you know. We need to have a school finished … in this society …to be well regarded, I mean …to have a qualification, a certificate. This is why we do it. Others I don't know how they do it. [with emphasis] But I do not think we will live out of this job. We will go – if things don't turn up right – we'll go abroad to work, it doesn't matter where. We'll go. We'll go and come, we'll go and come. This is what we have to do. If things don't work out.

I:        Aha…

Andrei:   [with a calm, quiet voice] That's it. (Pair interview, grade 10, woodworking class, small town)

Andrei's account went far beyond his individual situation. He developed a capacity to speak on behalf of his peers about more structural issues. This was rare in VET. But Andrei is also a Rapp music writer. According to him, VET is part of the social contract of minimal respectability and, ultimately, a compromise. On the one hand, schools turn a blind eye, as teachers are aware that VET is often a scenario for failure: employers do not need the skills taught and they pay little for the work. The jobs available to Andrei and his peers meet the criteria described by Standing: 'instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure)' (2011, p. 14). Besides, he and his colleagues seem well aware that for various reasons, despite the rhetoric on craftsmanship (rom. *meseria bratara de aur*), they do not learn the trade and the employment prospects cannot be but derisory. Migration is a temporary answer, yet, not a fascination, as they seem caught in a restless process of coming and leaving.

## Training Placements as Introduction to Precarious Work

In line with the literature on precarious work, this research asked where do young people in VET get the ethos of precarious economy from. Previous research indicated that young people are transformed by the learning and vocational cultures into which they are immersed (Colley et al. 2003). The concept of 'vocational habitus' was used in order to explain students' experiences 'as they have to orient to a particular set of work-related dispositions – both idealised and realised' (Colley et al. 2003, p. 471; Lehmann and Taylor 2015). This section explores young people's accounts on their experiences when in training and interrogates these settings for potentially providing a first encounter with the ethos of the precarious work. However, before taking on board the otherwise crude idea that training placements introduce young people into *Precariat*, one needs to consider the limitation that this research did not include any fieldwork observations to allow viable conclusions on the training cultures of these sites, as it has been the case elsewhere (Colley et al. 2003). It relies exclusively on secondary accounts.

What is more, the quality of training placements in Romania's VET varies tremendously and overgeneralizations are unsafe. As the next examples will suggest, the sceptical conclusions may apply to many instances. However, the same conclusions may be incomplete and an injustice done to several companies and schools. At one extreme, this fieldwork encountered instances where companies allocated resources for training, such as a qualified staff member, exempted from any production demands, distinct areas for gradual induction into work. These companies contributed towards students' monthly scholarship and also put in place appealing strategies for building young people's sense of belonging: from T-Shirts, to free transportation, the 'trainee of the week' panels, canteen lunch and outdoor activities with employees. Indeed, many young people felt a sense of attachment to the working community and perceived these environments as receptive and friendly. For those coming from a deprived family background, experiences of this kind provided a sense of validation that was missing from other areas of their lives. For the companies facing major recruitment difficulties, this type of approach has obvious strategic rationales.

But at the far end of the spectrum, the fieldwork came across signs and clues of highly problematic training arrangements. For instance, some young people in a hospitality class had the training placement at a local greenhouse owned by a friend of the school principal (from the leadership of the same political party) or, in another town, the training placement was within the company owned by the husband of the school principal. There, according to young people, students were required to pay for the days they call in absent, a practice unheard of in any other school visited and obviously against the law. In a rural VET school, without local companies, the training took place only in the school workshop: an isolated building in a deplorable condition, cold during winter and with outdated equipment. Young people produced chairs, later sold to a client close to the VET *maister*. The students received pocket money 'enough to buy a juice and a donut'.

In a small town with a poor socio-economic climate (few employers, high outmigration, a general sense of unease in regard to a growing Roma minority), the VET school encountered the refusal from the recently established firms which, apparently, rested ensured they could make their

ends meet with unqualified workers. Faced with the difficulty of establishing partnerships, pupils had to secure their own training arrangements, which were often in environments weakly prepared for training provision. In the large majority of the schools included in the fieldwork, students faced hidden costs, such as the requirement to purchase their own protection equipment and, when carrying out the training on school premises, to contribute towards the costs of the raw material (in cooking/bakery classes).

Overall, the quality of training placements seems highly dependent on a general sense of responsibility manifested by school's leadership and technical staff, by the availability of local companies and the extent they see value in school partnerships. In general, firms' calculus of opportunities takes into consideration the investment of time, effort, tools and raw material, but also the decrease of production costs, the capacity to prepare and select future employees, symbolic capital and so on. Or, as economic agents do not receive any formal compensation for their role in VET (unless partnering for a dual model,[5] which is still rare), it comes that schools' negotiation capacity is severely curtailed.

Many interviewed young people experienced the passage from first year in VET (where work was carried out on the school shop floor), to the practice in real-work settings as disillusioning. The strong sense of connection with the material world, the pleasure of doing things and gaining a sense of attainment seemed lost when they were put to execute disconnected tasks or work perceived as futile. They noticed, for instance, how good joiners are now 'sweeping the floor' below a machine that does the work, or how differences between bakers are blurring when the production process is highly standardized.

They experienced an unsolved tension between, on the one hand, their adherence to the established idea that trades are shared and socially transferred and the poor capacity of the practice settings to enrich their view of the occupation, on the other hand. Interviews unfolded a tacit layer of expectations drawing from an understanding of 'vocation' that was no

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[5] The recent legislative change made possible for companies to deduct the costs incurred by VET from the taxes and to have fiscal facilities. The same facilities are not available for the firms involved in conventional partnerships with VET schools.

longer present. For instance, provoked to reflect on a very popular saying that 'the tricks of the trade are stolen, not learned', two boys in a joinery class spoke at length about the importance of watching the work of an experienced person and how gradual autonomy develops based on imitation, supervision and trial and error (the 'grand narrative' on how learning *should* take place). Yet, when prompted to describe the process of 'stealing the tricks of the trade' in the placement company, both concluded that there is not much one can learn there as 'everything is automated.' The tension in their account rose gradually and ultimately embraced more structural concerns such as 'job specific' versus 'occupational specific' skills:

I:        There is a saying that 'the tricks of the trade are stolen, not learned'. How does it sound to you?

Flaviu:  That is, you learn from an expert

I:        Ahm

Paul:    [smiling] It depends …[speaking slowly] Not too much

I:        Not too much?

Flaviu:  Everything is mechanized where we do our practice…It's more about supervising the machine. That's all.

Paul:    You have nothing to learn. You only have to learn to do some operations on the computers. Not much to learn, really.

Flaviu:  You don't really get anything from that! Nothing! In five or ten years, you have no occupation. You know what I mean? You get nothing out of that! If you leave that factory and you ask yourself 'what did I learn there?' Other factories do not have the same equipment, you know what I mean?

I:        Aha

Paul:    So you get nothing. [with low voice] That's the problem… (Focus group, grade 10, joinery class, small town)

When school-based learning had a laissez-faire ethos (i.e. young people asked to write summaries or to repeat basic tasks) and the company of practice lacked a clear learning structure, young people appeared decapacitated in their intentions to learn a trade. With the exception of VET schools operating within a dual model, companies' personnel were usually not exempted from production. Besides, concerns for safety

seemed to interfere with young people's actual involvement. For instance, in two electricity schools situated in major cities, young people described with concern and contempt their actual training. The practice hours were divided between packaging electronic components at a firm and tedious work for connecting Christmas light cables for a major company contract.[6] The very few young people placed to a major hydropower spoke about an environment where 'there was nothing to do.' An interviewed class tutor (herself a teacher of psychology) confessed that for almost 20 years, parents systematically express concern over the quality of schooling, as their children, back home 'do not know how to replace a socket'.

Under these circumstances, young people's learning was highly dependent on their pre-existent knowledge of the area (based on family socialization within some VET habitus) and their level of proactiveness in shaping their learning experience. They perceived the quality of education as poor and their interest as low. Electricity was considered 'too difficult' as it allows little place for mistake. But interviewees also seemed very aware that they may avoid dealing with the complexity of learning electronics altogether, by working in other sectors, such as services or transport. Their expectations to work 'anything but Electronics' provide a response to problematic educational provisions and to a labour market that is fragmented and is able to accommodate loose skills acquired informally or on the go.

Many interviewees declared being very satisfied with both the training and the sociality of the placement, which they perceived as professionally useful and personally rewarding. However others perceived training situations as unfair. In some highly undemocratic workplaces, regular employees themselves experienced a strong sense of repression, which they tended to pass forward. Young people (and clients) were the last in the chain of domination. Interviewees described these environments as unprincipled, with many employees claiming a stake in delegating tasks to those in training. Situations young people experienced as unfair went from being subjected to other employee's pressure, to denial of voice and being delegated to perform daunting tasks. As a consequence, many

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[6] The training period was scheduled in order to suit company's need for intensive labour.

excluded the possibility of working for the firms of training, which they described as undemocratic or profit-maximizing.

For instance, a Roma young woman recalled being placed at the 'drinking and beverage' section of a supermarket, despite this heavy workload being habitually carried out by men. In a different occasion, she had to clean a large, unused fridge, a task many of her Romanian colleagues refused with disgust. For her, however, a poor evaluation from the training supervisor would have been too difficult to handle. Elsewhere, some young people placed in a butcher shop recalled being actively discouraged from selling the best meat first and placed in uneasy relations with customers. Overall, interviewed young people seemed outraged by the profit-maximization ethos and displayed a sense of disillusionment in relation to some 'dirty secrets in the trade' clients were not aware of. They noticed that when the pressure for profit ranks high, both employers and employees favour work practices that disregard craftsmanship. For instance, several young people in an auto-mechanics class criticized habitual practices in the repair shop where they were placed for training:

> My uncle told me that in Germany, mechanics look carefully to what is wrong and take out everything: piece by piece. Here, if the car owner is not there, they just pull the whole piece out. If they are lucky enough, there is no damage and they saved some time. If not, they break something and get in trouble. (Focus group, grade 11, mechanics class, municipality city)

When working in manufacturing, young people come to know that, despite their high ambitions for 'standing out', the work environments require a conservative type of attitude. For instance, when asked about the typical expectations of a supervisor at a manufacturing company, young people came with an abundant set of behaviours, all around the logic of group self-regulation: working 'not too fast and not to slow', in order to maintain the rhythm and meet the target, 'not to quarrel', to 'keep one's word' and 'not to miss out'. Young people seemed very aware at the intricate group dynamics that make workers dependent on peers' labour and which may render conflict inherent. They know, for instance, that a colleague working too fast may raise standards and lead to a new

target being set for all. They also come to realize that the bonus for exceeding the norm is sometimes deceptive, because—as it is often the case—a colleague may fail to attend and others are asked to step in. Some vague awareness at peers' control as alternative mechanisms of labour process governance seemed to emerge, yet, still incomplete and ambivalent.

Young people's position of 'insiders' when in training offers many opportunities for critique, resistance and disagreement. For instance, a major concern among some boys in a butchery class was that they are not able to 'learn the trade' at the department stores where they do the training hours, and where they are placed at the front desk, serving customers and occasionally at the grill section:

Dan:    In our butchery, we are in the factory and some of us are taken to the shops. I mean, where meat is sold, grilling and stuff…So we are spread in places. They want to teach us to serve customers, but at the end of the 11th grade, we'll get the exam on how to work in the factory, not how to serve men and ladies.

Irina:   the same for us. At [a major retailer] we are placed at the packing section. Here, in school, they teach us how to make the dough, how to spice it, how to work with the appliances and there, they do not teach us anything … we pack and serve people!

Ana:    If you ask 'Why it's only me doing the packing', they shout: 'there is your place and you should stay there'. And they don't let you go elsewhere. So, it's not as they praise themselves at the beginning.

Dan:    I mean, we are not geeks or the best guys, but after all, we are the ones paying the bills. After we finish VET and…we know nothing. (Focus group, grade 10, mixed class: butchery and patisserie, city)

However, according to Simpson et al. (2014), the major transformations of the industry (i.e. the appearance of increasingly standardized disassembly lines) brought structural transformations in butcher trade. Faced with the long-distance transport of refrigerated and processed meat, workers in the trade see their contribution redundant and reduced to trivial operations weakly able to demonstrate distinction and masculinity. Based on qualitative data, Simpson et al. (2014) suggest that butchers

mobilize new ways of relating to the work (as it became). They replace the physicality of work with knowledge about meat, for instance, yet, not without certain nostalgia for a trade that reinforced a shared sense of masculinity.

One should not jump to similar conclusions about young people's capacity to see how the very nature of work is changing (as discussed in Simpson et al., for instance). Most often, they interpret the above occurrences as context specific, rather than structural in nature. For young people, the leap from lived experiences to more general conclusions about changing labour market conditions is approximated, but rarely made. Yet, the promise of deeper stances on fundamental matters is there. One such comment of a 'structural' nature was that Romania's business community prioritizes profit at the expense of anything else. The general perception among young interviewees was that the country has a stratum of (small and medium) business owners with a recent entrepreneurial culture, a crude understanding of success in ways that curtail social responsibility or longer-term visions on human development. Interviewed young people spoke at length about the 'Romanian business owners' as different in character from employers abroad: with weak empathy and a disproportionate focus on profit. At times, some interviewees hold them accountable for migration.

Often, teachers' accounts resonated with young people's frustrations. According to them, the country has a short history of private initiative and the entrepreneurial culture is often heavily embedded by the promise of climbing fast the profitability ladder. Several teachers argued that communism destroyed Romania's intellectual and entrepreneurial elite and its middle class. The small and medium enterprises that emerged after the 1990s have a brief history and high ambition. For instance, entrepreneurship is rarely linked to any family tradition to be preserved. Instances of socially responsible entrepreneurship were rare. As a school principal argued:

> I'd love business owners to have more patience with children, because they are not that hard to manage. If they are in VET, they have already come a long way and they want to make something out of their lives. It would be good for companies to have a special department for pupils, to match them

with the more experienced workers. We do our share at school; we explain the processes, the steps. They just need to go one step forward. But it may be that the business owner is without much education himself, without any knowledge of Psychology, Pedagogy. Maybe he even completed VET. In this case, he should be wise enough to hire someone with more qualifications. But they don't. (School principal, Electricity VET, city)

Another cross-cutting theme among teachers referred to generational differences between young people and the supervisors in the training placement. Speaking about their students, teachers argued that 'this generation is highly concerned with the way they are being talked to' while the industry places a strong focus on production/ service delivery, at the expense of attentive relationships. Or, when supervisors (including schools' technical staff) have different socializing cultures and overlook the importance of supportive communication, young people can feel easily hurt. According to the interviewed teachers, the recent cohorts display higher sensitivity to the mode of communication than their older peers. Indeed, interviewed young people often spoke about their low tolerance for sharp criticism. They perceived unequal treatment as offensive and positioned themselves as unable to tolerate being 'shouted at'. While they resent the authoritarian style of those in a supervising capacity, young people seemed eager to receive constructive feedback and to be involved in close working experiences that had a learning component.

Yet, young people seem equally aware that quality practice is not cost free. Despite claims of competence (the 'grand narrative' of craftsmanship), they display a realistic stance on an initial inability to carry out tasks at the level required by the industry. They seem cognisant that employers cannot afford productivity losses generated by entry-level workers. Young people also know that clients have high expectations and that new entrants function under a minimum tolerance for failure. Transition from a more permissive school environment (when mistakes or lenient discipline may be tolerated), to a work setting may pose difficulties of adaptation (punctuality, discipline, level of autonomy). It even appeared during interviews that several relations with companies were curtailed due to unpredictable losses incurred by trainees, or that several young people were rejected following major deviations or misbehaviours.

When interviewing employers, we gained a sense of the difficulty people with a supervisory role in the industry, as well, face in dealing with variegated personalities 'at work'. See, for instance, the following account of a production manager (in his late 40s) responsible for a unit producing car equipment within a multinational company. Facing a high rejection rate for the pieces produced, he feels 'having hands tied' for not being able to manage the employees causing problems. Like many other interviewees, he faces a dilemma between the need to maintain authority and the practical constraints of turning a blind eye, in order to maintain the staff, a situation 'unthought-of years ago'. To him, human relations are time consuming and debilitating in many ways:

> It's very, very hard! I told you, I'm … Every person. You go to one [worker] and he says, 'OK, I understand, I promise I do not to do the mistake again'. You go to another, 'Man! That's it! I'm leaving! Tomorrow I'm not here'. You go to another and she starts crying and she cannot do anything for the whole day, because she's devastated. Like if I killed her or something. Or, I just told her that some pieces she produced came back. Gee! This is mad! This shouldn't happen! We're all psychologists nowadays. I proposed to the HR to hire a psychologist to stay and talk to every single one: 'Why haven't you come to work yesterday?' O, this is another issue: they don't even bother to call. Just come the next day that they felt sick. 'Really? Have you been to the doctor?' 'No, because later I started to feel better'. 'Right. So what shall we do with the day of yesterday?' 'Well, can you just give me a day off?' 'Well, according to the regulations, you have to ask for it two days before'. And the HR asks me to be more indulgent. That woman is desperate because she told me: there is no way whatsoever she can find others to replace these guys! (Interview production manager, automotive industry, major city)

Nevertheless, employers are different and they expect different things from their trainees: from strict compliance and adherence to rules, to creativity and spontaneous inputs. The discourse on VET (and employability, for that matter) is not only homogenizing students, but also 'employers'. For instance, one can identify several typologies of settings where young people get the training. There is, to start with, the small

firm, where the practice supervisor is the owner. Small automobile repair shops or small bakeries are typical examples. Such settings enable young people to be involved in a variety of tasks, yet with a high degree of control and pressure. Larger firms may have more structured ways of incorporating young people, yet being highly dependent on the type of work carried out. Textile companies, big hotels and restaurants, as well as the retail sector may pose some productivity demands and/or require the performance of tasks perceived as tedious: clothing labelling, sandwich making and shelf placement, all with occasional cleaning duties.

When the work environment poses high risks of personal injury and damage, young people were more likely to be involved in mere observation. This was a frequent complaint from young people trained in welding, electricity, chemistry or joinery. Their gradual introduction in work was a matter of the availability of staff, their personal capacity to relate to young students and an overall organization ethos that may accept, yet not involve, students. Nevertheless, the risk of misusing valuable work practice for cheap labour and the focus on productivity may be present in all settings. Indeed, an OECD review of VET in Romania highlighted that in the absence of quality control, workplace training opportunities 'can degenerate into a masked form of cheap labour, or involve very narrow and firm-specific skills' (Musset 2014, p. 21).

Importantly, however, the interviewed business owners/human resource staff appeared convinced of the weakened capacity of VET schools (by large) to provide adequate training. According to some employers (and teachers), even when holding the qualification, young people may actually lack the skills needed to perform well work-related tasks. This is happening because of different technology used in the workplace, but also because of the crude utilitarian expectation that young people need to be productive from day one. Unlike large companies that have induction programmes, middle and small companies cannot afford the productivity losses associated to young workers who are insufficiently trained. On the other hand, some situations that became evident during fieldwork were unapologetic: mechanics complaining that young people use their cell phones during training and are completely unaware of any basic technical operations, or a catering company deciding to cease its

partnership with a local VET school because of students' being notoriously unreliable (absence and long breaks).

During the public consultations on VET, employers' representatives (especially of medium scale) expressed concerns over the economic costs of investing in young people in VET in the absence of 'some employment obligations' later on. Anxieties over poaching, migration and expense recovery appeared high on their agenda. But introducing employment as a contractual obligation (very much a practice during communism) appeared equally unattractive, as it would introduce some bounding obligations for companies, as well. The solution out of this vicious circle has not yet been found. For instance, in the region of Moldova, the dual system is planned to be introduced from the 2018/2019 school year. After eight companies demonstrated a *de principle* interest in the dual system in a major city, six renounced after expressing concerns over its cost.

It is important for young people to have quality work placements, but, at the same time, one needs to acknowledge that the relationships between VET schools and employers' 'needs' is far more intricate. By prioritizing employers' requirements, schools tend to enact a way of seeing skills that is task specific. According to McGrath (2012), the idea that 'employers know best' is one of the most controversial assumptions in the area of VET, as it is grounded in the notion that employers are, invariably, rationale economic actors and regard investment in skills judicious (which may not be the case). In addition, employers may put pressure for company-specific skills, at the expense of occupation-specific skills that are more resilient and able to ensure some mobility in the industry. This is the distinction Thompson argued back in 1974 thus: between teaching young people 'all about a job' (a 'nondemocratic' choice ultimately limiting the options for development) and 'all an occupation is about' (which involves enabling trainees to acquire a vision of the entire industry, its social contribution, etc.). The need to equip young people for long working lives, based on broad preparation and not for narrow skills, was a major UNESCO concern even during 1970s (Faure et al. 1972 cf. Billett 2011). Conversely, when young people are trained in view of very specific company needs, the risk of a precarious occupational destiny is high. The state may need to play a role in reconciling different interests and in

setting an agenda that responds to a coherent vision. Or, for the time being, the political priorities seem far from enabling a cogent understanding of the purposes of VET.

Overall, the interviews with young people seem to indicate they often have to navigate unfriendly environments, where the genuine opportunities for learning are not democratically available to all. Young people inhabit different structural positions that may or may not help them maximize the learning opportunities. For instance, some young people who have parents or siblings working in the trade seemed more likely to secure training placements that provided more advanced opportunities for skills. They appeared more likely to demonstrate, or to mimic (in ways that resonate with the *habitus* in the trade), an interest in ways that called for consideration (e.g. they were asked to perform tasks considered more advanced, solicited for some part-time work, or offered a job upon finishing VET). Depending on their level of proactiveness—which is socially enabled—young people can maximize the opportunities to learn a trade. Conversely, those with parents working abroad lacked a socialization process that enabled them to internalize a certain VET habitus.

Companies' personnel rarely act in a proactive manner, with a deliberate effort of attracting the students not holding a pre-existent interest for the trade. Thus, young people, socially remote from VET (and the world of qualified employment, for that matter), are more likely to remain 'out of reach'. During interviews, these young people decried the absence of opportunities to actually learn a trade, yet blamed themselves for not 'showing interest' (as they lacked the 'habitus' needed to interpret the signals of the workplace). Invariably, these young people came to the realization that despite their initial claims of competence (the 'grand narrative' of craftsmanship), they have a weak capacity to carry out tasks at the level required by the industry.

Or, research suggests that vocations are manifestations of agency, but they are also socially shaped. As argued in Billett, 'it would be quite inaccurate to propose that individuals' choice of vocations is purely premised on their own efforts, capacities and agency', regardless the way young people's social worlds embed vocations (2011, p. 77). The training placements seemed, however, unable to shift their initial apathy and ended up

reproducing the privilege of some and the disadvantage of many (the so-called 'Matthew effect'). The capacity of VET to function as a social inclusion tool is, thus, ambivalent.

## On Young People's Resentment and Political Voice

This section tries to access young people's social and political consciousness. It starts from the assumption that Romania's political turmoil,[7] with major corruption concerns and many public accounts of dubious wealth accumulation, provides a vibrant context for young people's social agency, criticism and anger. However, most often, young people's social awareness seemed limited to vague criticism of the *status quo*. The section relates young people's difficulty in articulating the sense of injustice they appeared to share, with earlier theories on subordinated classes' denial of voice (Bourdieu 1986; Honneth 2007; Hodgkiss 2016), but also to the more recent research on precarious work. Important starting points are Standing's argument that anger is one of the four As characterizing *the Precariat* (2011) and Sennett's notion about workers' resentment at being patronized by the elite who seem to steal social prizes to which they have no right (2006, 2008).

Towards the end, the section discusses young people's ambivalent attitude towards school, which mixes an inside-critique (school is not 'what it used to be') with self-indulgent, expedient behaviour (VET is good because 'it's easy'). It is argued that the current policy thinking is tributary to the belief that it is within schools' possibilities to reshape young peoples' attitudes towards different kinds of work and employment (see Foster's VET Fallacy back in 1965 and its more recent revisit in King and Martin 2000). The argument goes that by 'fixing' VET schools, young people may increase their confidence in manual trades. This research

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[7] The fieldwork was carried out between the autumn of 2015 and the summer of 2016, before the major protests against corruption. Nevertheless, major civic concerns that later brought people into streets were present (notably, high-level corruption and fraud, the political tendency to subordinate the justice system, misuse of public money etc.).

indicates, however, that often young people know too well which VET schools may lead to good jobs and which may not. This opens up the concept of employability in ways that go beyond skills alone, towards structural considerations about the 'work availability in the labour market' and 'individual's perception of what work is "right" for them' (Bates 1993, p. 14).

Questions addressed during interviews tried to 'test' young people's propensity to see structures, to think about themselves as a 'class in the making' (Standing 2011) or (at least) as a generation/cohort. For instance, young people were asked to compare parents' youth with theirs, to argue whether they have 'different chances', whether/how the labour market changed in time and so on. Data analysis cherished any small instance of structural awareness (or suggestion thereof). In the final analysis, however, we had to concede that the interviewed young people do not seem to think much of their own generation. When they do, they tend to have ambivalent views that combine victimization (i.e. the difficulties of securing a house and a decent living in Romania) with a negative view of their peers (i.e. greed and superficiality). Invariably, discussions on migration prompted some critical consideration of Romania's broader situation; yet, no interviewee went beyond vague political appraisals, or displayed more than a 'crude' type of analysis. Young people struggled to articulate some—yet, confusing—meanings of citizenship. But all in all, finding the verbal expression for political and social concerns was indeed a challenge for those in VET.

Interviewee's difficulties to articulate a cogent political/social critique confirm earlier theories on subordinated classes' denial of voice or 'culture of silence' (Freire 1981). In general, literature shows that apprehending the 'feelings of injustice' of subordinated classes is extremely difficult, as they are not encouraged to make explicit their normative convictions (Honneth 2007) and have a suppressed self-image (Freire 1981). There is wide agreement that in many ways schools repress political learning processes of the subordinated classes (Bourdieu 1992; Freire 1981; Giroux 2001). This happens because the values they promote do not allow young people to 'correctly interpret the reality' they actually experience (Mann 1973 cf. Hodgkiss 2016, p. 135). This explains why interviewees' references to injustice were limited to short, at times

implied, statements. They fit the profile of those considered by Bourdieu as 'the morally tongue-tied' (Bourdieu 1992, p. 52).

An example is how in a focus group four Roma girls from a very disadvantaged Roma neighbourhood engaged in a vibrant debate over a famous TV show. One such programme focused on the desperate situation of a large family (location unknown), unable to care for the young children. The girls were well aware of similar situations in their village, also, and several critical stances did emerge (e.g. in relation to the cycle of poverty, anti-Gypsyism and parents' disregard for education). However, despite the girls inhabiting a social world that calls for structural awareness and critique, the actual situations back home was far from reaching the same level of heated involvement as the TV show that also provided the language for interpreting the situation (yet, in a non-political way that eluded the role of structural constraints). Frequently, young people demonstrated a weak capacity to see the structures framing their (working) lives. For instance, in other focus group, young people were uncertain whether the company they carry out the training was private or state owned; this basic frame for 'reading' a work situation was missing.

Instances of this kind confirm previous findings that for the young people who are victims of 'multiple structural injustices' (social class, gender, educational achievement), who have weak cultural capital and limited agency and who are confined to a low-value educational route, 'awareness of political and educational structures and power imbalances is absent' (Atkins 2010, p. 258). Informed by the capability approach and youth participation in policy making, we actively searched for instances of political involvement among young people. Their level of actual engagement with political ideas appeared to be little and framed in easily dismissive ideas: 'voting is nonsense. Voting for what? To choose who is going to steal me?' (Alex, grade 10, mechanics class, town).

When a sense of injustice did emerge, the circumstances were rather atypical and the tension high. See, for instance, Adrian's account. He is in tenth grade, textile profile, in a small town. He would like to join his father who works in Germany. Yet, Adrian knows he has to remain in his small town, as his mother is very ill and he has a younger brother to care for. His account gradually showed elements of resentment, converted in an anarchist tone. Ultimately, he declared his admiration for those

making a fortune by corruption, as 'this country doesn't deserve more.' Ingrained attitudes of this kind among the socially disadvantaged became increasingly a concern for the expanding social movements of 2017 and 2018. One may consider positions like those of Adrian are counterintuitive given the major problems he encounters. However, according to Pillay et al., the endorsement of corruption and dubious wealth is precisely *because of* his situation back home, as 'negativity towards democracy are frequently indicative of low levels of satisfaction with service delivery rather than with democracy per se' (2006, cf. Powell 2012, p. 209).

More recently, Winlow and Hall (2013) argued that as the capitalist system works to reproduce itself, disadvantaged young people are prone to the same behaviour patterns as those occupying the current positions of advantage. Bluntly, were they in position of privilege—the authors argue—the disadvantaged would not make the world a better place. Winlow and Hall (2013) focused on consumption. But besides consumption, our research also questioned the way young people in VET occasionally endorse corruption and greed as part of the 'human nature':

I:        You know, people may work for the state, at the town hall, for instance. What do you think about them, how is the life of a state employee?

Horatiu:  It's a great life and … I understand them. Everybody says they steal, but if we think about it, were we in their place, we ourselves would do the same; we'd reap for ourselves.

Daniel:   Everybody thinks about their family.

Horatiu:  If you think how we live, how we used to live and see that they try to do things only for them, in their place, we could, as well steal, do stuff, but we would try to do good things for the rest, as well.

Yet, a few minutes later, the discussion turned into a strong support for a nationalist type of feeling needed to protect 'what is left' from a collective patrimony threatened by the race to the bottom:

Horatiu:  In the Parliament and at Bucharest, there, everything is….there everything is stolen, everything. I can't figure out what is going on, but on TV you see million euros stolen…fraud and ….

Flaviu:      […] I understood that once somebody has money, one wants to have more and more. This is our mentality. This is human nature. All of us are this way, so no one can change that. Many people go abroad to steal or stuff, they manage once, manage twice but the third time, maybe they should stop and think: well, let's stop. But no, they don't do that because they want more and more… so this is people's mentality. And what I see nowadays is how bribe …so the bribe brought Romania in this terrible mess. Before, in Ceausescu's time, other states owned us money, now, we are in such a debt … beforehand, Romania exported. And especially what is wrong now is that we sell the land to whom? To foreigners, so we will get to a moment when we'll be so poor, why? We'll reach a moment when foreigners will own an awful lot of this country and they will start making the law. We have these nice forests, why should they cut the forests? There are other countries which don't cut their woods 'cause they want to have flora and fauna intact and they come to cut our woods. In a way, it's ok, they want to make money, but you have to think a bit. Romania has many resources; we used to have so much! (Focus group, grade 11, mechanics class, small city)

Horatiu's account, close to a lament, touches many social problems: from gold mining on behalf of foreign corporations, to migration and Romanians' tendency to spend their holidays abroad, 'instead of supporting country's tourism'. Flaviu just repatriated from Italy where he received all his education and where the family continues to pay a mortgage. His mother started a small business in her home town, but times are hard and it doesn't seem to go. His father 'is not going to stay long in Italy' as well, after working as a truck driver for a company that recently required employers to register as 'self-employed'. Yet, Flaviu is very anxious about moving back to Italy where he would gladly work as a lorry driver upon turning 18. To him, the 'self-employment' measure does not raise any concerns; his account does not seem to incorporate any interpretation of his parents' working lives, including some 'lessons learned'.

Horatiu seems to be one of the 'good students' the head teacher wanted us to interview. He seemed attached to the idea of becoming a mechanic

and appeared determined to continue his high school by evening classes, as 'you never know when you need it [the high school certificate].' Both try to process a strong resentment towards a present that does not hold to their expectations. This process includes confusion, tensions and a sense of secondary nostalgia over an ideal past they never experienced. In some way, it is unexpected from an 18-year-old person, with an extensive experience abroad, to display strong feelings for a country he lived very little in. On the other hand, the very experience of migration created the enabling circumstances for more 'structural', critical questions to be articulated by adults and internalized by children.

Despite the persistence of social remnants of the communist past, young people seem less inclined to consider 'the state has to do anything' in regard to their own situation. Interviews seem permeated by an internal locus of control and a sense of self-governance. Young people rarely demonstrate awareness at the structural dynamics that make labour market as it is. In a neoliberal projection of responsibilities, they tend to blame themselves for the frequent job changes; for instance: I guess I'll have loads of jobs, as I'm changing my mind so often. Similarly, when asked how an ideal boss should be, it was frequent for young people to start listing traits such as the capacity 'to understand' (to be compassionate), but also authority. Young people internalized their subordinate place. According to them, a boss needs to maintain some professional distance from employees, in order for them not to take advantage of 'his kindness', or simply 'to be taken for a fool'. In extreme situations, in a focus group some consensus started to build around the idea that a boss needs to be a 'harsh guy':

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|---|---|
| I: | Were you a boss, how would you behave with your employees? |
| Irina: | Very well. |
| Sandra and Marcela: | He has to understand them. |
| I: | To understand them, you say. |
| Sandra: | Yes. Understanding matters the most. To be good. |
| Irina: | I think they were sympathetic at first. But you cannot give them [the employees] everything and your firm will just collapse. |

I:          You mean employees …

Irina:      Yes. A boss has to be authoritative. He has to have authority. I mean, he may be friendly outside; we may well have a drink together. But when he's in front, you [as an employee] have to know to do things right. Not that you come and hang around, you have a good laugh, you eavesdrop him talking with the other boss. It has to be an authority […] Like, 'I cannot give you an increase, or a different salary than your colleague, because…' that sort of things. 'I cannot just give you a day off when I need people to do the work', for instance.

I:          Right, right.

Sandra:     You have to be equal to everyone, not to make any difference.

Irina:      At the end of the day, a boss sees his own interest, not the one of the employee. Cause that's why he became a boss. (Focus group, grade 10, public alimentation class, major city)

Young people in VET tried to reconstruct links between education and labour market in ways that escape their understanding. For instance, they seemed deliberately in search of unsuccessful stories of overqualification, in order to legitimize their VET 'choice'. Yet incongruences between education and employment status do start to be more frequent, especially in major cities. Interviewees commented on contradictory stories of success that render education unimportant:

Many have four grades and are bosses or team leaders and do well. Others have high school and the baccalaureate and have nothing. It doesn't matter whether it's high school or VET. What matters is to be smart. (Vlad, grade 10, constructions class, major city)

Faced with the troubled labour market, teachers also described a strong sense of powerlessness. They work under major constraints not to reduce the number of pupils below a certain benchmark. Demographic changes raise major 'sustainability' concerns. Consequently, teachers expressed a de facto incapacity to fail students, regardless their performance. As a

result, young people develop ambivalent attitudes towards schools, which mix an inside-critique with self-indulgent, expedient behaviour. As in Powell's research on VET (2014), interviewed young people had a strong confidence that you 'cannot really fail':

> This school is not what it used to be. It's only that you have to come…it's like going with hands in your pocket, for a soda, downtown.[8] It's useless. Nobody asks you why you came or why you didn't. Just to be present. Ha ha ha! (Claudiu, grade 11, mechanics class, town)

Many interviewees seemed to inhabit a vicious circle: they ended up in VET 'against their will' or 'by chance/by mistake'. In a context of weak mentoring and poor exposure to the world of work (see, for instance, their parents' marginal positions on the labour market), they were rarely proactive or with a demonstrated interest in the trade. Schools may underestimate young people's actual capacity to learn and may offer those in VET few meaningful opportunities to actually discover the occupations they are suited for and to learn what is needed to perform the occupations (the two goals of vocational education, according to Dewey 1916). When interested to work part time, young people do odd jobs, unrelated to their VET area and which further remove them from the prospects of becoming proficient. The objective prospects of employment with mere instrumental value are high.

Invariably, young people reach a point when they acknowledge the VET can, indeed, lead to an appealing, reasonably well-paid job (the 'grand narrative), but which is 'not for them'. As the responsibilities for this situation are mixed and difficult to trace, young people swing from blaming themselves for not showing interest, schools for not steering their awareness and the training settings for allocating marginal roles (by virtue of their 'unpreparedness' for more qualified tasks). And, in a neoliberal turning, young people end by projecting the source for this troubling equation in their inherent lack of attraction for the VET field, as 'you have to like it.'

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[8] Literally, some interviewed young people (especially boys) appeared to have no backpack. They come to school with a single notebook which they use for several disciplines.

Back in mid-1960s, in the context of newly acquired independence of several African countries, a major concern was whether it is within the power of schools to shape society by changing young people's views on jobs or, whether, on the contrary, schools and young people receive the influence of the economy. Against this background, Philip Foster, an important scholar, argued that, despite all the positive expectations, 'schools are remarkably clumsy instruments for inducing large-scale changes in underdeveloped areas' (1965, p. 144). He was sceptical about the extent schools can counteract the influence of the economic systems and 'become an active instrument in a massive economic and social transformation' (King and Martin 2000, p. 4).

However, despite the 'vocational school fallacy' being well supported by data, it is still better known in academic circles than in policy making (King and Martin 2000). With the single exception of World Bank which ceased to support VET during 1970–1980s, policy makers remained attracted to the idea that one can change the social perception of work by manipulating young people's views and to do this, through VET schools.[9] According to Foster, however, the perception about a job is dependent on the salary and the social standing. In 2000, Kenneth King and Chris Martin published *The Vocational School Fallacy Revisited* which largely confirm Foster's findings, yet it argues that schools may—in certain limits—exert an influence over young people's attitude to employment.

Of course, Foster and, more recently, King and Martin came to the above conclusions in a totally different social, political and economic context than the one of this book (the developing world, Ghana during 1960s and late 1990s). The rationale for referring to Foster's inquiry is that we need to remain watchful, mind the questions from the 1960s and be open to the idea that—despite the best intentions—schools may fail to deliver (otherwise legitimate) goals or have a lower-than-assumed influence. Their research stands for the need to interrogate any attempt to use schools as *the only* channels of infusing a broader, economic or societal change. Schools alone cannot do that. As argued in King and Martin, the research of Foster is not only about VET: it is about any attempt to

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[9] http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2537/Vocational-School-Fallacy.html

manipulate a single element of education for generating a societal change (2000). He was not against VET, but against projecting illegitimate expectations upon schools.

Romania's current policy thinking is tributary to the belief that one can reshape young peoples' attitudes towards different kinds of work and employment via schools or, sometimes, with a little help from the media. The quality of employment is rarely interrogated. This research indicates, however, that often young people know too well which are good occupations (that are well paid, stable) and ascribe value to schools depending on the type of jobs they are able to lead to. For instance, young people know gas installer jobs pay well and are stable. One of the very few VET schools in this field was included in the fieldwork. Unlike anywhere else, this school disregarded any 'marketing' efforts and had each year people enrolled from distant localities countrywide.

The recent history of textile work is a different case in point. With burgeoning offshoring in the clothing industry, the demand for labour force was very high for years, and, habitually, many VET schools offered classes in textile. Yet, in time, textile work attracted a bitter social image: low salaries, extra hours, poor working conditions. Despite companies' pressure for VET schools to 'deliver' textile workers, this remains one of the most unattractive occupations and young people try to avoid it. As a consequence, and despite the high pressure from the industry, schools tend to reconsider their offer. VET in textile still has one of the highest numbers of students, yet with extreme recruitment efforts. More recently, following increase production costs in Romania, companies from the clothing industry started to relocate, leaving behind the image of textile work as highly precarious.

The above examples show that VET comes in many shades of grey and should not be taken as an undifferentiated whole. Different areas have different levels of attractiveness, because of the type of jobs they lead to. Whilst young people (and their parents) look with reserve towards some VET areas (textile and constructions), some other areas that allow for secure, long-term employment (gas installations) or solo-self-employment (auto-mechanics, electricity, plumbing, cosmetics and hairdressing) are in some demand. This confirms previous research suggesting that 'what young people really want are real, practical skills which are directly

transferable to the world of work and which would fulfil the promise of high-pay, high-skill work in a knowledge economy' (Atkins 2013, p. 28). Regardless policy, young people—when they can—tend to do what they think is best for them. It comes that the current policy ambition of channelling 60% of the young people in VET[10] in a context when they explicitly want something else is problematic. Also, the idea that young people should respond to (short term) economic needs and not to their individual vision of themselves carries ethical problems.

But, as argued in King and Martin (2000), this research also identified some instances where the VET schools were instrumental in sending a positive image about an (otherwise precarious) job. It seems that each VET schools has its own ethos about work that is transferred to young people. In different schools, young people tend to aim towards different things and to share a set of views on work. For instance, they may see the potency of a local success story highlighted as a model by school staff or share the opinion that their qualification is well paid abroad. However, this research did not identify any instances where young people become aware of and questioned some of the myths they were induced into believing. These may be more likely to emerge later during their occupational trajectory, if at all.

It was argued that VET can—just as any other educational sector—play a personal and social emancipatory role when assisting young people in overcoming the limitations placed on them through 'circumstances of birth and/or earlier education experiences' (Billett 2011, p. viii). Yet, the ideal mission of VET can be conceived in an even broader sense. In *Critical Education for Work*, Lakes and colleagues enlarge the meanings of education, in a way that may include not only *functional* empowerment (i.e. the technical, practical aspects of the job that enable good execution of tasks), but also *critical* empowerment. This assists learners in shaping a 'cultural politics of work' that involves participatory citizenship, social responsibility towards democratic workplaces (Lakes 1994) or, in the words of Dewey, a capacity to act for an 'enlightened social order' (Dewey 1916, p. 319).

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[10] In this context, VET stands for technological high schools and initial vocational education and training (rom. *scoli profesionale*).

One needs to distinguish between empowerment as 'integration in the existing order' (learning for earning), which is, indeed, a fact for many young people and the empowerment as seen by Freire: the capacity to challenge the existing order (Tur Porres et al. 2013). This is where VET in Romania (and in other parts, as well) falls short in responding to. The absence of any formal structure within Romania's VET, equipping young people with the basic information on the terms of a work contract, on issues of discrimination or labour rights, substantiates this claim.

Ultimately, it may be that the search for young people's awareness at structural dynamics is unjustified and premature. Their work experience is very limited and indirect and VET schools do not provide many circumstances for interrogating 'the structures'. Age plays, nevertheless, an important role. In line with the cultural-developmental approach, it may well be that, with all the biases involved, we are searching within a working-class setting for what are in fact middle-class elements (i.e. a certain tendency to debate and interrogate structures). However, as argued in Freire (1981), disadvantaged young people need to master the political language of the elite, because this is how they can argue for their rights. And VET schools are instrumental in enabling (or in silencing) this form of power.

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Sennett argued that for the precarious workers he interviewed there are three values able to provide the needed cultural anchor. These were a sense of narrative (that is the long-term accumulation of events in a way that builds up a cohesive sense of self), social usefulness, and craftsmanship (as a belief in the existence of *correctness* and *rightness* outside one's own interest). Borrowing Richard Sennett's metaphor, what interviewed young people need most is a 'mental and emotional anchor' (2006, p. 185). As this research indicates, young people in VET are in search of such an anchor by their ideal projection of secure work, status built up in time and the importance allocated to fellow colleagues (the 'ethics of community', according to Jensen 2011).

Yet, the actual circumstances may pull them further away from gaining this sense of peace. To Sennett, there are several collective ways able to prompt change against the odds: a different role for trade unions, the 'basic income' scheme, an alternative sense of usefulness through volunteering. Although he considers a (re)turn to craftsmanship as 'the most radical challenge, it is also the hardest to imagine in terms of policy' as institutional climates are already shaped in ways that expel the engagement and commitment, which are both part of craftsmanship (2006).

For the time being, young people in Romania's VET navigate alone, in the absence of strong institutions supporting their 'transition'. Given the troubled political context, it did not come as a surprise that from the over 300 young people and adults interviewed, nobody mentioned trade unions. Young people and adult interviewees replace collective bargaining with individual processes of self-governance. Yet, interrogations about what is correct or right start being heard in the civic space. At the time of writing the book, Romania witnesses a revival of civic participation, but also strategies for silencing it. The civic movements draw on a large urban population. It remains to be seen whether the young people in VET will engage in the collective forms of craftsmanship-as-citizenry that start to be articulated, or, as argued in Standing (2011), they will remain uninvolved largely due to the many structural constraints that prevent their participation.

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# 8

# Conclusions

For many reasons, drawing conclusions for this research is a difficult thing to do. The main concern is not to be judgemental and to take interim inferences as ultimate certitudes. Thus, the assertions below need to be taken with prudence as intentions to make sense, map and approximate a very complex topic. Partial, as they may be, conclusions should not be confused 'for the territory' they attempt to convey.

This research was carried out in a context of a public apprehension that young people's work expectations undergo deep change. On the one hand, there was the widespread view that young people have rather high expectations and poor 'work ethic' (the 'lazy and entitled' stereotype). On the other hand, it became increasingly obvious that the stable working opportunities in place for the previous cohorts are no longer present. The research started from the idea that—in a context of skills drain, race to the bottom and a weak state capacity to support quality employment— chances are that soon many young people now in Romania's VET will have *precarious* jobs. Our (raw) underlying question was whether they display some awareness at such prospects and how it is manifested.

The accounts of over 250 young people in VET seem to suggest a weak capacity to recognize and interrogate the structures shaping their lives.

The research points towards the coexistence of three different modes that frame young people's relationship with their future (working) lives. They do not seem well aligned or part of the same set of values, as they originate in different ideological registries. Mapping a complex territory like young people's accounts was an intricate process. For explanatory purposes only, this book took the three spheres apart. In the actual narratives, they overlapped and combined in sometimes unpredictable ways.

The first is a rather normative level, positioning young people as competent interlocutors anchored to powerful and conservative values of hard work. Accounts of this type suggest young people anticipate a sense of progression towards conservative (yet hard-to-attain) destinations: stable jobs, validation and reputation, home ownership and family life. In this line of thinking, work becomes an identity marker, a major source of accomplishment. Work is dignifying in the sense that it allows for other social roles with personal meaning to be exerted (filial duty, home ownership, family formation, a sense of comfort from doing a work they like etc.).

The second is the level of 'real values' shaped by actual interactions in the world and which suggests young people's engagement with the neoliberal mode of self-governance. It suggests that those in VET exhibit a probably similar tendency to experiment with options and choices, as their high school peers. Many internalized the idea that a wide range of (semi-skilled) jobs are, indeed, available. The neoliberal quest of experimentation seems to extend downwards on the occupational ladder. While excluding the prospects of professional, white-collar jobs, young people in VET seem convinced there are many options unfolding, for them to choose from. The question 'what would you like to be when you grow up' seems very much open and in progress for those in VET. Their distancing from any stability of purpose resonates with a culture that departs from craftsmanship. It comes that the notion of 'vocation' is, for many, an ironic adagio. For instance, many interviewees accept the 'compromise' of spending three years in a school they feel remote from, yet while maintaining the belief that, indeed, they can be whatever they want to be. And, as they already learned to adjust their aspirations to what is feasible, the horizon of possibilities goes from a precarious job to another, in Romania or abroad. For many, the imagined capacity to move horizontally in the labour market is taken as 'freedom'.

The third layer is the level of necessity or the actual expectations that are grounded in the deep realization that the actual prospects likely to unfold are more constraining than enabling. Here, projections on the future (working) lives are displayed in a hectic, restless mode, without plans and 'end points' ('we'll come and go, come and go' or 'whatever will be, will be'). Young people's views on the future escape linearity and are based on chance and unplanned occurrences. Migration is almost an inevitable ingredient in their imagined futures, invariably linked with the idea that the prospects back home 'will not work out'.

The identified layers elucidate some of the initial confusion that may characterize young people's conceptions of their 'imagined transitions to work'. Sociologically, they help disentangling self-contradictory accounts that simultaneously include disparate plans such as (i) a conventional aspiration for a stable workplace that responds to one's perceived 'inner calling' (or to the compelling discourse on vocationalism); (ii) a need to explore different (yet precarious) jobs for the 'perfect match'; and (iii) the crude realization that one has to 'come and go', take whatever comes in order to make needs met.

In regard to policy making, the above layers may challenge the decisions of anchoring measures in a single understanding of young people's complex worlds, like it often happens with the discourses on skills and employability. For youth studies, the findings question a quantitative orthodoxy based on identifying typologies, profiles, clusters or tribes that have the individual as the main unit of analysis. They show that—at least when trying to make sense of highly complex and uncertain issues—the same individual may simultaneously experience different layers of meaning making.

The research suggests that interviewed young people have an overall sense of purpose, largely defined in terms of family life and a conventional sense of security. When it comes to the occupation, their vision seems fractured, with overlapping layers of possibilities, ambitions and anxieties. Young people have destinations (decent life, house, stable job, family), but have poor understanding of the routes to get there. They internalized the idea that the structures to assist them upon finishing VET are weak and they are left to navigate and negotiate their own ways. However, because of its exclusive focus on VET, this research cannot

come to any conclusions whether interviewees' expectations differ from those of other young people in Romania. For example, it is difficult to say whether they are the only cohort looking for a stable job and seeing progression through hard work and perseverance. What we can say, for sure, is that given the economic and political environment, those in VET are *not* the only group seeing its future prospects as limited. The high migration rate from Romania—regardless the level of education (see the brain drain and the skills drain)—speaks for itself.

By and large, VET in Romania does not create the enabling circumstances for the young people to be occupationally competent, in the sense of being able to read trends, to see potential transformations in the industry and so on. Many interviewees regarded their trade and skills as permanent. For instance, the overwhelming majority would agree that it is possible to find a workplace one 'really likes' and to work there until retirement. The notions of 'skill insecurity' or 'technological unemployment' did not reach them. They feel a strong need for stability and certainty, conditions the current labour market is scarce of. We can attribute their drive for security to an innate human need for stability (Sennett 1998), but also to a certain ethos infused by the teaching staff with a conventional entrenched 'work ethic' and a limited exposure to the industry *as it is*.

The book suggests that we need to shift from a de-contextualized (judgemental) look to young people as having/not having a work ethic, to a view that regards their views as attempts to negotiate complex routes to a personal sense of well-being. The focus on young people's work ethic is open to criticism because of simultaneously overrating the experience of work, whilst underplaying young people's experiences at present. Or, interviewees' ambivalences and insecurities show the limitations of the employability and skills agenda and the need to engage with young people's complex subjectivities that go beyond being more 'employable' or having a generally acceptable 'work ethic'. These social worlds include the aspiration for autonomy or for reciprocating the care, girls' sense of empowerment, a silent social criticism, a search for validation via consumption and so on.

At the end of the day, however, it may also be that we as society ask young people in VET too much too early. The curriculum until grade 8

is heavily focused on liberal education, with underrepresentation of first-hand experiences with the material world and non-verbal learning methods. Some groups (arguably, boys, young people from rural areas, the Roma) may be more disadvantaged than others. Besides, VET as a system does not allow the same level of choice as other education sectors do. For decades, a young person enters VET *after* making an occupational choice (itself cut short of localism), without much exploratory possibilities left open (Thompson 1973). At the same age, high school students indulge in exploration, whilst their sense of uncertainty is normalized. Even later on, the emerging practice of the gap year speaks about a perceived need for some extra time to make a career decision. Conversely, young people going for VET are expected to make a decision at the age of 14 and three years later, when employed, to have a 'good work ethic'.

What is more, there is weak legitimacy for expecting young people to have a 'vision' or a plan on how their next years will unfold, as the economic climate surrounding them is unpredictable and schools help little in making sense of the change. They witness how the relationship between good schooling, good work and good life is shaken. Their VET and work 'choices' are highly constrained by the local economy, with little alternatives. The rhetoric of 'vocation' poses, for many, a sense of compulsoriness they hardly resonate with. And, in turbulent times, the only decisions they can make are, obviously, short term and provisory. It is not by chance that the need for autonomy emerges so powerfully for the young people navigating these constrained contexts.

## VET and the Limitations of the Employability Discourse

VET policy making has employability at its core, and it shaped an oversimplified way of looking at the young people and at the causes that lead to the *status quo*. As a result, policy responses tend to be technical and, in Romania, have the individual as the 'unit of intervention': see re-skilling, up-skilling, training provision, CV writing and so on. They lack a deeper engagement with the underpinning tensions that lead to the current discrepancies (i.e. Romania's high functional illiteracy rate, or its rural-urban

disparities that call for solutions that are more structural in scope). The book argued that a policy drive to attract more people in this education sector needs to start from a more informed understanding of who young people from VET are and what social dynamics lead them towards this sector.

Policy making takes for granted that the young people in VET know (and can tell about) their future working lives. By unfolding young people's social worlds, the book added in complexity to the dominant approach that reads VET through the lens of labour market and economic imperatives alone. It interrogated a policy discourse that prioritizes skills at the expense of engaging meaningfully with young people's personal and civic lives.

In their emphasis on class power and exploitation, labour process theories, as well, produced 'wooden models of the wage – labour relation' that were disconnected from the actual experience of work in people's everyday lives; they ignored major human concerns of workers (Epstein 1990, pp. 89–90). This research communicates also to the labour process theorists, in the sense that it brings young people's own views closer to the understanding of complexity involved in labour relations. It argues that in order to create effective support systems for young people we need to engage with their own views, as VET is not only a 'work thing'. Yet, the book perpetuates the paradox: it aims to develop the argument that young people in VET are more than 'employability', but in doing so, it speaks about work. Indeed we cannot avoid the self-irony of starting the conversation about what matters to young people, yet end focused on work (with the conclusion that there is so much else going on and that the 'young people in VET and work nexus, calls for interrogation).

Previous literature argued that everywhere employers tend to see VET through utilitarian lenses and expect young people to meet job and even workplace requirements to a very high extent (Billett 2006, 2011). However, it was surprising to see this utilitarian view embraced by school authorities, as well. The education policy makers or top officials interviewed for this research seemed rarely aware of the severe bias perpetuated in VET. It was indeed, disturbing to see the potency of deficit arguments for framing policy making at very high level, in a rhetoric of 'not everybody should/could/need to'.

Interviewed young people, on the other hand, spoke about 'having a job', but did not see themselves as 'marketable' in the sense the policy discourses on employability claim. They seemed anchored in a set of robust beliefs in the value of hard work, stability and 'love for one's job'. 'Employability' is a policy concept (confusing and contested in many ways), which young people in VET do not have. This brings us to the argument presented in Laker et al. as a reaction to the utilitarian view of working people: 'if the policy makers and industry leaders truly believe in market solutions, then they should respect the vocational aspirations of the people and provide support for education and entrepreneurial skills to be developed in individuals to use as they wish' (2014, p. 397).

## VET, the Dual Model and the Social Inclusion Agenda

VET attracts high public and policy expectations related to poverty alleviation, social inclusion and employment, in a context that is only partially able to sustain it. In Romania, for instance, there are risks for VET to be a short-term social inclusion project packaged as an economic measure. Powell (2015) questioned the use of VET as an anti-poverty measure. She found the concern with employability/VET in institutions trusted with a poverty alleviation mission, unapologetic when structural conditions that allow poverty remain untouched. Paraphrasing her insightful comment, one could argue that the legitimation for VET within the agenda of poverty reduction in Romania is questionable, as well. One needs to interrogate the type of jobs that are made available through VET, the extent they are, indeed, a way out of poverty and towards self-realization, or another way for trading a precarious life for another. For the time being, a strong discourse against those benefiting from welfare support replaces a cogent discussion of in-work poverty and the quality of jobs available. The link between social inclusion and work remains unquestioned.

There seems to be high policy consensus that a dual model in VET is the way forward in Romania. The new legislation starts to be aligned with

the demands of industries' major players. Romania aspires to have a dual model, yet the country has strong social inclusion problems that the dual model can hardly attend to. For instance, the few examples of dual VET in place in Romania seem to suggest that in time the dual model becomes more elitist than regular VET schools (the focus of this research). When involved in the selection of pupils, companies engage a strong marketing apparatus that attracts young people situated, from the baseline, at a higher academic level than the rank and file VET students (who are more likely to remain in the same, underfunded system). Schools with conventional VET programmes will need to find ways to manage the high intake of young people without basic academic prerequisites. Chances are that this will further discredit the VET system and the young people who inhabit it.

For the time being, the generalization of the dual system is both problematic and unrealistic in Romania: the level of economic development varies highly and sometimes schools themselves are reserved in establishing partnerships that involve more intense cooperation and higher workload. In a different context, Hagedorn (1999) and De Stuart (1999) developed the idea of a 'superoptimum solution' as an objectively better response when reaching an ideal is not realistic. It might be that—for the time being—Romania may need this type of answer. Its ingredients were not within the ambition of this book. Yet, we hope that some of its findings are able to inform wiser choices than the ones currently made.

A dual VET system needs the contribution of many actors and has an inherent complexity that cannot be easily replicated. According to Eichhorst et al. (2015), employers must be willing to provide training according to curricula; government must provide adequate support for VET schools and teachers, whilst young people and parents need to accept VET as a viable option. Or, these elements tend to be mutually reinforcing, developed over a long time and cannot be just transferred (Eichhorst et al. 2015). Young people need good work placements, but also the enabling circumstances for navigating the world of work 20 or 30 years after finishing school, as the occupational trajectories of those with VET are particularly awkward.

Research shows that orienting the VET system in a way that is task-centred, as a response to very narrow needs of economic agents, is unsus-

tainable and more likely to increase the vulnerability later in life. It seems that the higher initial employment rate of those from VET is accompanied by an increase in unemployment by the age of 50, as occupation-specific knowledge quickly becomes outdated (Hanushek et al. 2011; Malamud and Pop-Eleches 2008). Romania faces a clear problem of 'human resource replacement', yet pertinent labour market forecasting on the extent VET is economically needed (and of what kind) are incomplete.

Ultimately, VET is a reflection of the level of trust that may exist between institutions and groups. It is highly dependent on states' vision on economic development, the economic priorities and the way governments understand to position themselves in relation to other actors: young people, their families, teachers, employers, trade unions and so on. For the time being, however, employers in Romania seem to have a weak trust in schools' capacity to provide quality learning. Often, young people have low trust in the quality of training provided in company settings, whilst schools see their capacity to exert some influence, weakened. Good partnerships that are needed for a dual system take time. According to Mulder and Roelofs (2011), it takes about two years before two partners speak the same language, know and trust each other and have realistic expectations.

As the number of dual schools is likely to increase, it is important to engage in a discussion on the principles underpinning the different niches and branches of the VET system. How can (the neoliberal) VET policy—as reflected in a dual system—ensure the public-private partnerships are socially inclusive? To what extent the dual system allows for critical stances (in line with Dewey's call to cultivate democratic habits in VET), when the private companies may have a say in the selection of staff teaching humanities, for instance?[1] What social project do we (as a society) have for the young people in VET and how is it articulated? Would a neoliberal logic of 'education-as-individual-value-accrual' (Gerrard 2015) provide a satisfying response?

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[1] The new legislation in Romania gives a strong negotiation power in regard to curricula and selection of teaching staff, to companies.

In making a case against the interference of the market as regulating mechanism in the Australian public schools, J. Smyth argued that 'the result has been an intensification of social stratification as the already "disadvantaged" miss out yet again in education' (2012, p. 153). This increasingly seems to be the scenario for Romania, as well. According to Smyth, the way out of this unfortunate policy is 'to begin to include the desires, wishes, lives and experiences of young people − and the way to do this is through the promotion of policy approaches that are informed by and celebrate "student voice"' (2012, p. 153), very much the purpose of this book.

This research included several 'hard to reach' groups that are largely absent from previous research on VET. In the absence of a quantitative methodology, it can, at best, suggest some areas that may deserve in-depth analysis. One is made of the rural young people who experience marginalization differently and in ways that go unacknowledged. The scholarship on periphery in Europe needs a more serious engagement with the idea that in several countries a large young population is disconnected from the social benefits associated with urban living. Besides obvious economic disadvantages (largely known), a major drawback is that their social worlds are geographically limited. Rural young people's imagination about opportunities and choices seems severely curtailed by what is locally considered to be possible. Interesting research on their subjectivities in relation to rural location and issues of spatiality started to be produced in Australia (Farrugia 2018; Farrugia et al. 2018; Farrugia and Wood 2017; Cuervo and Wyn 2012). For the moment, similar interests are rather local and contextual in Europe.

Another situation that calls for further analysis is the apparent overrepresentation in VET of the young people from foster care. It is uncertain whether their presence is an expression of choice, or the absence thereof. We incline to believe that their place in VET is in many ways an expression of capability deprivation and 'profiling' in ways that prioritize institutional interests. One could argue, however, that in Romania, precisely because of schools' struggle to survive, VET reached to otherwise 'untapped' groups, made of highly disadvantaged young people that would, otherwise fall through the nets of the education system. When assessing the 'effectiveness' of VET schools in Romania, the social value of bringing young people at

risk of dropout, closer to the educational system, calls for acknowledgement. Nevertheless, this should not be an easy excuse for low-quality schooling. As argued in Heyneman, signalling inadequacies and inefficiency in VET needs to be made public; it is part of a moral project that no country should avoid (Wallenborn and Heyneman 2009, p. 412).

## On 'Schooling Without Learning'

The term 'vocational education' contains the underlying assumption that it is 'for life' (Thompson 1973). The concept has a rather idealistic undertone, tempting us into believing that VET is a lifetime gain and, that, nevertheless, vocations can be adequately reflected within today's labour market.[2] Or, as this research suggests, many young people—at least in Romania—enter VET with a very remote understanding of what it is about. When they complete grade 8, children 'tick' options for the next cycle, sometimes without due regard to their implications, with weak guidance, if at all. But VET in Romania seems rarely a selection pool for a trade or another. This may explain the frequent easiness of speaking about young men and women crossing gender boundaries in feminized or masculine occupations. The links between a VET area of training and the imagined future occupation is often fractured. Frequently, VET schools end up being 'a place to spend the years left until turning 18' or close to a form of social control.

Up to present, much of the literature on VET refused to engage with the idea that many of the young people in VET are functionally illiterate, apathetic, at times with behavioural problems, learning difficulties or histories of youth offence. The 'negative selection' into VET is a characteristic in many countries; if unaccounted for (as it is most likely the case), it leads to a systematic underestimation of VET effects (Eichhorst et al. 2015). A cogent discussion of VET effectiveness needs to engage with the idea that there is a baseline difference in achievement among those entering VET, in the first place. This explains, for instance, why the de facto

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[2] Romania's new legislation on VET gradually replaced the notion of 'vocation' (and even 'education') by 'professional' or 'technical' 'instruction/formation' (rom. *invatamant*).

closure of VET in Romania years ago cannot be adequately traced in an improved high school completion rate, but it was accompanied by higher dropout.

It is becoming obvious that for many young people in Romania's VET, simple math calculations are sometimes difficult. When 42% of those aged 15 countrywide are semiliterate (OECD 2014), this is not a personal falling of some, but a systemic problem that needs serious, structural policy reform. With the third highest early school leaving rate[3] in the EU (19.1% in 2015 cf. EC 2016), Romania is the only EU country with a public expenditure on education relative to GDP lower than 3.5% (Eurostat 2017). This calls for more profound interrogations on the education system as it is and for more than mere incremental policy change—a major challenge given that in the last 30 years the country had 20 education ministers and obvious policy discontinuities.

According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, globally, six out of ten children and young people are not learning a minimum in reading and mathematics (UNESCO 2017). The causes for these troubling statistics are attributed to the failure to ensure access to school, the failure to retain children in schools and—importantly for VET—the failure to provide quality education *within* schools. While the onus usually goes to the first two sources, it is now increasingly evident that there is something going on in schools, as worldwide the majority of children who are not learning *are attending* classes (UNESCO 2017). VET in Romania is a case in point for this silent 'learning crisis' that recently entered UNESCO and World Bank interest.

The young people included in this research, many of them 17-year-olds, have over ten years spent in schools. As an interviewed teacher pointed out: 'if they are in VET, they have already come a long way,' as a quarter from each cohort drop out before reaching grade 9 (Institutul National de Statistica 2017). But those in VET have been in school and now, due to a monthly scholarship (ironically, based on attendance!), continue to come—sometimes surprisingly more often than their high school peers (who do not receive scholarships). Yet, their level of illiteracy

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[3] Age 18–24.

is high. This confirms that 'getting children into the classroom is only half the battle' (UNESCO 2017). The statement of S. Montoya conveys the uncomfortable truth that applies to Romania's education as well: 'We know where these children live and go to school. They are not hidden or isolated from their governments and communities – they are sitting in classrooms' (UNESCO 2017). 'Schooling without learning' recently became a metaphor for referring to this 'learning crisis' in global education (World Bank 2018).

In the quest for bringing children and young people in school, we tend to overlook 'the missing middle' of those now attending (VET), yet, functionally illiterate and without much gain. Or, in Roberts' words, they are ordinary young people 'following neither a NEET (not in education, employment or training) pathway nor a "tidy", government preferred, route through post-compulsory education' (2011, p. 21). As this book suggests, Romania's VET education is failing many of its students; for those now in VET, the transformative potential of school does not seem to hold. Other needs—related to employment and teaching norms—are now given precedence to those of young people themselves. There are severe reductions in the number of schools in the name of efficiency, a poor preparedness of teachers to provide quality education (including unqualified teachers in rural       areas), a weak capacity for a stratum of parents to provide for their children and so on. An entire cohort in today's Romania experiences structural disadvantages that lead to precarious lives. Many young people from rural areas cannot make the leap from grade 8 to grade 9, as this would involve hidden costs, overcoming some cultural resistances and, nevertheless, a reasonable level of academic preparedness. The highest level of dropout is there.

The 42% of the young people who are functionally illiterate need stimulating educational experiences. This leads us also to question teachers' capacity to reach this group and their needs. Their initial training has long been a contested issue, as well as their assessment of performance. A previous educational reform was severely curtailed by institutional resistance. At present, the type of initial training does not provide prospective teachers the tools to get to, and to meaningfully involve 'the hard to reach' groups in a culturally competent way. The understanding of diversity in student population is very partial; for instance, the urban/

rural divide is absent from the current pedagogical thinking. As elsewhere, in Romania's educational policy making, 'metropolitan young people' are taken as 'globally emblematic of young people as a whole' (Farrugia 2018, p. 4). Increases in teachers' salary alone may not solve out this deeply engrained mind-set. It may well be that the young people in rural areas are in need for a curricula more oriented towards soft skills in the area of communication, areas that urban young people handle much better.

In the long term, one should not underestimate the constraining power of functional illiteracy that limits young people's capacity to engage in further education across the lifetime. From this perspective, secondary schools failed in what Letwin (1988) described as their 'duty' to provide young people a grounding, that is 'the ability to read and comprehend various kinds of information, to be able to write and speak clearly and to use a certain level of mathematics' (Letwin 1988, p. 12). For young people, the failure to receive a grounding entails the 'failure to function at a minimally autonomous level' in society, as grounding is important for their working lives, as well as for their functioning as citizens (Letwin 1988, pp. 12–14).

Without relying on a rigorous economic analysis, this book provided empirical support that calls for higher investment and care for the quality of learning at the base of the educational pyramid, as argued for the UK, as well. There, the 2011 Wolf Report made a strong case for the value of literacy and numeracy, while questioning the utility of specialization below the age of 16 (Wolf 2011). A recent UNESCO report (2017) came to the same conclusions. It seems there is a certain agreement on the value of literacy and numeracy among employers, as well (Wolf 2011).

Notwithstanding the above, still, the policy mantra in Europe (and also in Australia) places a strong focus on raising the aspirations of (otherwise) disadvantaged young people. This policy ambition is related to human capital investment and economic competitiveness in the so-called 'knowledge economies' (Zipin et al. 2015, p. 227) and embodies a neoliberal ideology where 'good qualifications are equated with a good job' (Stahl 2014, p. 90). Yet, to many researchers the discourse is close to a 'simple antidote to complex problems' (Stahl 2014, p. 91). As rightly argued in Cort et al. (2018), and as this research also suggests, young

people do have high aspirations (yet, often within the confines of perceived social positioning). However, they are deprived of the enabling circumstances to realize the lives they have reasons to value, as phrased in the capability approach (Sen 1999; Walker 2006; Powell and McGrath 2014; Powell 2012, 2014).

## VET and the Search for New Metaphors

VET incorporates a high load of societal bias: on what work is worthwhile doing, by whom, what they need to know (in order to perform the work) and why (Billett 2011; Winch 2000, 2003; Wolf 2002, 2011; Ewens 2012). This is linked with major ethical issues on voice and its repression, on the power to dictate what is good (for 'other people's children'), on what industry/society needs versus individuals' aspirations. For a long time, VET was in search of a 'parity of esteem' and sought for legitimacy in comparison to liberal education, conventionally seen as 'superior'. The book advises that in the process of reinstating VET attractiveness, the search for 'positive metaphors' (to parallel Rehm's statements from 1994) carries the risk of crude generalization. Rebranding VET through as an undisputed pathway is as hazardous as the overwhelming reliance on negative metaphors. We just replace a stereotype with another. Young people come to know too well which VET programmes lead to good jobs and which do not.

The research was carried out in a context when VET reached political momentum: a public consultation, the change of legislation and an unprecedented surge in media interest on the topic. The policy rhetoric was largely built on challenging a (middle class) assumption that higher education is the best solution at hand. Indeed, the widening access to university brought some distaste for manual work and situated white-collar work as the normative occupational route. The marketing of VET heavily contested this middle-class definition of achievement. Whilst the EU approach validates VET as part of a process that may lead to higher education and emphasizes progress routes and choices, the 'marketing of VET' in Romania situates VET as an alternative to higher education. It interrogates the uncertain employability outcomes of higher education,

with the hope of persuading some of the young people who would, oth-erwise, apply to high school and then to university. Against this context we expected a divide between the policy ambition of having more young people in VET and young people's own aspirations (that would favour the 'conventional' route to higher education).

Or, for the majority of the young people already in VET, this seemed far from the case. Their experiences with schooling were already of such nature that the very idea of going to university was remote and striking. It became obvious these are not the young people media and officials refer to when promoting an either/or (higher education) discourse. Young people's aspirations were calibrated to their social location. Frequently, many interviewees imagined education beyond VET as a long, hectic series of schooling years and examinations leading to uncertain results. This suggests they were weakly informed about realistic prospects upon completing VET and the steps to be taken. They lacked the map and the guidance to navigate educational options. The links with the world of further education or the progress routes into high school seemed frac-tured and highly dependent on schools' internal policies of advancing such processes. Some social barriers related to a sense of inferiority may add up.

Thus, by positioning VET largely in relation to those at one end of the spectrum (the otherwise successful young people going to high school and then to university), we are actually eluding an important discussion about those for whom the 'middle class' norm is extremely remote. By pointing to the 'inequalities *within* a generation' (France and Roberts 2017), this book contributes at building the argument that VET may, as well, reinstate the power of pre-existent social divides. Ultimately, it calls for tempering the tone of high expectations in relation to the capacity of VET to act as a social mobility tool.

But there might be more than meets the eye in the relationship between VET and higher education. The social construction of VET as a negative vote to higher education (as it seems to be the case in Romania) may not be without explanation. The focus on VET brings into light presumed returns that other educational tracks cannot offer. For instance, VET plays the card of financial autonomy, youth agency and fast employment. In a context shaped by overqualification/underemployment, prolonged

youth and intergenerational co-residence, VET holds the lure of a better option. Thus, before embracing VET unconditionally, one needs to interrogate the phenomena VET proposes to be a solution to. Why is overqualification such a (tacit) concern? How is it that the most educated generation that humankind has ever had coincides with such a high rate of youth un/under-employment? What about the actual demand for youth employment?

In an 'imagined experiment', we can brainstorm some disconcerting 'what if' type of questions such as the following: What if tomorrow all young people who dropped out in Romania go to school? What if all (young) people now working abroad come home to work (as the political leadership pretends it strives for)? What if all young people with VET will claim a workplace in their field of training? In the final analysis, responses to the above questions may lead us into discovering the incapacity of other structures to lead young people to the types of lives they have reasons to value. Ultimately, by analysing the discourses surrounding VET, we may come to a better understanding of other crises in the educational system within the labour market and in the societies we live in. VET could, thus, become a good starting point for a new research agenda.

Despite an increasingly precarious labour market and unfriendly life circumstances, interviewed young people tell a story of agency and have rather conventional expectations related to work and family life. They seem to rely on long-held notions of work as relatively stable across the lifespan, with an important element of choice and satisfaction. However, policies able to legitimize their belief in long-term stable employment in a trade are no longer present. One cannot ask young people to act as craftsmen in a system that is such that *other* ways of working and relating to employment are encouraged or valued.

Indeed, many authors interrogated the role of the state in precarization. According to Ken Roberts, 'the decades of relatively full employment were the result of governments prioritizing full employment' (Roberts 2016, p. 478). For Standing, states are complicit; to him, precarization will stop when states will want that to stop (2016). According to Prosser, the deregulatory strategies of public authorities are particularly significant drivers of precarization (2016, p. 949). Winch called for an 'active state', able to develop economic policies that make VET attractive to employers (2013). Thus, the

tendency of 'cosmeticizing' VET or of framing 'the VET problem' as one of the images (alone) has to consider very seriously the type of jobs VET is leading to and the ethics of 'marketing VET' when the scale of in-work poverty and precarious employment (for those in VET and, often, for university graduates) is high.

## VET and Young People's Civic Selves

At the beginning of the century, in a context of increased corporate interest in VET, Dewey warned that the denial of opportunity for development and advancement was inherently undemocratic and unfair (Dewey 1916). He argued that whilst VET may, indeed, prepare young people quite effectively on the technical side, it may also leave graduates with 'very little understanding of the place of those industries or professions in the social life of the present, and of what these vocations and professions may do to keep democracy a living, growing thing' (Dewey 1937, p. 188). Following Humbold' s ideal, he interrogated the role of VET in preparing young people to earn a living, yet failing to liberate individuals.

He argued that VET should not aim for producing 'skilled workers for hire', but to enable young people to make their own choices in order to master their 'economic fate' (Dewey 1915). Dewey was in favour of an education system that does not channel young people for liberal education and for vocational education. In his opinion, this would strengthen class divisions and be detrimental to democratic ways of life. Vocational education, his argument goes, 'should not be for the sake of industries—but for the sake of citizenship' (Dewey 1913, p. 101). He claimed that education should be realigned with 'newer social needs' (Dewey 1915) and argued that the problem of modern life is the doing away with all barriers that keep up social divisions (Dewey 1901 cf. DeFalco 2016).

Long after Dewey, VET continued to prioritize the economic self at the expense of the civic self and, thus, to perpetuate the 'economic bias' to our culture (Thompson 1973). The notion on 'learning for earning' still shapes the understanding of VET (DeFalco 2016). Educators tend to be perceived as having failed to deliver appropriate vocational education

provisions and the debates over the 'future of VET' prioritize companies' interests (Billett 2011). Yet, when 'business interests dictate educational policy' (Martinez Aleman 2001), VET students do not have equal opportunities and schools perpetuate social injustice. And, as this book suggests (at least in Romania), VET is about the preservation of social divides.

During this research, it emerged that young people in VET are more complex than the public image attributed to them and sometimes more complex than the school staff assumes. Their personalities cannot be crudely reduced to the work carried out. They too have high aspirations, yet calibrated by lower expectations. They are interested in employment, but they instrumentalize employment for other social purposes considered meaningful. Importantly, young people seemed very certain about the type of work they do *not* want to carry out. They resent a social regime on youth that tends to discredit them as capable and trustworthy. Overwhelmingly, young people detest the work environments which equate value with the rhythm of carrying out tedious tasks. Eventually, they come to understand that the expectations the new economy places on manual workers may be illegitimate when the work carried out does not entail minimum agency.

According to Winch (1995), although VET has been designed to meet an economic (or even a social control) purpose, this should not rule out the idea that young people attending VET have their own liberal aims, such as autonomy. He argued that liberal and vocational forms of education exist in different degrees in all forms of education and that it is a mistake to see them as incompatible opposites. Accordingly, if it is for young people in VET to care about what they do, both as individuals and as members of an occupational group, 'they need some kind of moral education' in order to develop honesty, persistence, loyalty, willingness to learn and compassion, which are all necessary for 'performing well in an occupation as opposed to just going through the motions' (Winch 1995, p. 28). The idea seems remote from the crude possibility that many of the young people in VET may have Taylorized jobs, demanding mere obedience and conformity, which are not moral virtues (White 1997 cf. Winch 1995).

This research suggests that for the time being VET in Romania is not capacitating young people in order to deal with intricate matters ahead,

such as deceitful employment, precarious work, migration and a deep sense of injustice and marginality 'here or there'. It concludes that the influential discourse on skills is partial and not able to do justice to the high complexity of issues young people face or are likely to face. Ultimately, VET needs to be revisited by having in mind young people's weakened capacity to articulate resentment and to find political voice for the unsolved tensions they struggle with.

## Back to Fundamental Questions

There hardly seems to be any level of consensus among the actors involved in VET, in regard to its overall aim. It is not only that employers, teachers and young people use different language registers, but they also speak about different things. Employers require qualified workers in ways that suit industry-specific (or even company-specific) needs. The government seems inclined to act according to employers' interests; as an interviewed representative of a multinational company declared, in Romania 'absolutely all requirements from the industry were met' in the new VET legislation. Schools, on the other hand, start to operate in a market-like logic, driven by indicators such as the number of students (read: institutional survival) and reputation. Many would renounce VET were there not the pressures to attract students and expand this track. On the other hand, faced with the choice of having very low success rate at *baccalaureate*, VET seems a safer option for schools. At their turn, young people come in VET for different reasons; yet, all appear in search for easy ways out into the world of work, sometimes with a cogent understanding that a short-term reconversion course may be needed. Their parents seem powerless in articulating a position in regard to VET, whilst being structurally remote from the labour market where education brings a distinctive advantage. In many ways, they are 'missing' from young people's accounts on work and VET.

As rightfully argued in Billett (2011), there is not such a thing as 'evidence of effectiveness' in VET, unless we come to an agreement over what is VET for. Consequently, this book calls for recalibrating the focus on VET by engaging with several fundamental questions on its philosophical underpinnings. Before deciding what type/version of VET works, those

involved in shaping its policy need to be clear about what kind of society is desired and by whom and what social and economic purposes is VET put to serve. Is the purpose linked to decreased unemployment, to 'acquisition' of skills, school retention, decrease in youth offence, cheaper labour force, students' satisfaction, personal growth and human flourishing, and something else or a combination of the above? Depending on what we define as being its purpose, we may establish criteria for evaluating what works to what ends and for whom (see also Billett 2011). What is the purpose of education and what is lost from citizenry when VET is put to serve a goal at the expense of another? As rightly put forward in Powell (2014), are we—as society—content with the idea that we have different plans for different young people? Who defines 'what is right' for other people's children and based on what (read: whose) criteria? We need to start a debate on a renewed VET project not from the pedagogy of 'skills transfer', but by engaging with more fundamental question like the above. Or, paraphrasing Jackson (1993), we may start by asking: *if VET is the answer, what is the question?* And—as this book suggests—young people need to be part of that discussion.

Depending on how we prioritize or reconcile the voices of the different stakeholders involved (young people, parents, teachers, employers, society by large etc.), we will define the purpose of VET and then can go a step forward and ask whose responsibility it is (Billett 2011). The research process behind this book demonstrates the value of *engaged scholarship* (Longhofer et al. 2012) which integrates the knowledge of researchers and non-academics: young people, policy makers, teachers and employers. For the moment, the goal of reaching a consensus may be too ambitious for Romania (if, indeed, possible). A more cogent choice may be to build upon the creative tensions generated in the dialogue that started to unfold, to encourage genuine debate on hard-to-reconcile issues and to cherish reflection, dilemmas and critique. Hopefully, this book contributed to this process.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.