Journal of Technical Education

Band 14, 2026, Heft 1

MARIO SANDOVAL MANRÍQUE (Universidad de Los Lagos)
JOAQUÍN GAIRÍN SALLÁN (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

Dilemmas and Challenges in Job Placement Among Young Technical and Vocational Secondary Education Degree Candidates: The Cases of Chile and Spain

Journal of Technical Education (JOTED)

ISSN 2198-0306

Online unter: http://www.journal-of-technical-education.de

MARIO SANDOVAL MANRÍQUE / JOAQUÍN GAIRÍN SALLÁN

Dilemmas and challenges in job placement for young graduates of technical and vocational secondary schools: The cases of Chile and Spain

ABSTRACT: This article was written jointly by the authors as part of a collaboration between the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Spain and the University of Los Lagos in Chile. It analyses the dilemmas and challenges faced by young Chileans and Spaniards when they finish technical secondary school and try to enter the labour market or pursue higher education. The working method involved analysing data from secondary sources in both countries, reflecting the tensions and discrepancies between the technical vocational training received and job insecurity after completing secondary education. The main findings and conclusions are that some young people do not complete their vocational training because they do not finish their internships, while a significant percentage do not work in the field in which they studied. In this context, we highlight measures related to the functioning of the education system and the completion of the training programmes themselves.

Keywords: educational work, youth transitions, Chile, Spain.

Dilemmas und Herausforderungen bei der Arbeitsvermittlung für junge Absolventen technischer und beruflicher Sekundarschulen: Die Fälle Chile und Spanien

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Dieser Artikel wurde gemeinsam von den Autoren im Rahmen einer Zusammenarbeit zwischen der Autonomen Universität Barcelona in Spanien und der Universität Los Lagos in Chile verfasst. Er analysiert die Dilemmata und Herausforderungen, mit denen junge Chilenen und Spanier konfrontiert sind, wenn sie die technische Sekundarschule abschließen und versuchen, in den Arbeitsmarkt einzusteigen oder eine Hochschulausbildung aufzunehmen. Die Arbeitsmethode umfasste die Analyse von Daten aus Sekundärquellen beider Länder, die die Spannungen und Diskrepanzen zwischen der erhaltenen technischen Berufsausbildung und der Arbeitsplatzunsicherheit nach dem Sekundarschulabschluss widerspiegeln. Die wichtigsten Ergebnisse und Schlussfolgerungen sind, dass einige junge Menschen ihre Berufsausbildung nicht abschließen, weil sie ihre Praktika nicht beenden, während ein erheblicher Prozentsatz nicht in dem Bereich arbeitet, in dem sie studiert haben. In diesem Zusammenhang heben wir Maßnahmen hervor, die sich auf das Funktionieren des Bildungssystems sowie auf den Abschluss der Ausbildungsprogramme selbst beziehen.

Schlüsselwörter: Bildungsarbeit, Jugendtransitionen, Chile, Spanien.

1 Introduction

The transition from youth to adulthood is conditioned, among other factors, by how much preparation for work young people have. This preparation can follow different paths depending on the range of opportunities that young people are offered: opportunities that, in turn, are conditioned by the cultural and financial capital of the family of origin. Thus, the structure of these transitions combines the processes of training (education), job placement, and emancipation from one's family (Dávila & Ghiardo, 2012).

One of the paths chosen by a large number of secondary school students is technical vocational secondary education, which combines theoretical and practical learning in a specific field of specialization oriented to entering the world of work.

This paper focuses on technical training in secondary education, which refers to vocational studies undertaken before 18 years of age and the usual age of entry to university. In Chile, this is called professional secondary education (*enseñanza media profesional)* and in Spain it is called basic training (*formación básica*) and intermediate training programs (*ciclos formativos medios*).

This paper does not delve into other forms of training for the work world, such as: training and internship contracts that may be promoted by companies; occupational training; specific training for the unemployed; or continuing professional development for employed workers.

This study is grounded in the literature on youth transitions from education to work, which conceptualizes these trajectories as non-linear, socially structured, and increasingly fragmented processes shaped by institutional arrangements and socioeconomic inequalities (Dávila & Ghiardo, 2012). From a life-course perspective, transitions to adulthood are understood as the interaction between education, employment, and family emancipation, mediated by structural constraints and individual agency.

In addition, the analysis draws on theories of labor market segmentation, which emphasize the existence of differentiated employment trajectories characterized by unequal access to stable and protected jobs. In this regard, vocational education and training (VET) often functions as an intermediate mechanism between education systems and segmented labor markets, particularly for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The concepts of precariousness and informality are further informed by approaches to social reproduction and the capability approach. While VET is frequently promoted as a tool for employability and social inclusion, its actual capacity to expand young people's real opportunities depends on the quality of training, institutional coordination, and the structure of labor demand. Informal and precarious employment, therefore, are not merely individual outcomes but reflect broader structural mismatches between education systems, productive sectors, and social protection regimes.

This theoretical perspective provides the analytical lens for the comparative examination of Chile and Spain, allowing the study to move beyond descriptive institutional differences and to identify shared patterns and country-specific dynamics in vocational training pathways and labor market integration.

This study is based on a comparative qualitative analysis of secondary data drawn from official statistics, policy documents, and existing empirical studies on vocational education and youth labor market integration in Chile and Spain. The selection of sources was guided by their relevance, institutional credibility, and comparability over time, prioritizing data produced by national ministries, international organizations, and peer-reviewed research.

While this approach allows for a comprehensive overview of structural trends and institutional arrangements, it also entails certain limitations. Differences in statistical categories, data collection methods, and reporting periods between the two countries constrain direct comparability. Furthermore, reliance on secondary data limits the ability to capture subjective experiences of young people and micro-level transition dynamics.

Despite these limitations, the comparative design is appropriate for identifying convergent challenges and divergent policy responses, providing a robust basis for analytical synthesis and policy-relevant conclusions.

More specifically, the selection of secondary sources followed three methodological criteria: institutional reliability, temporal consistency, and cross-national comparability. Priority was given to datasets and reports produced by official statistical agencies (such as national ministries of education and labor), international organizations (e.g., OECD, Eurostat, and the ILO), and peer-reviewed academic studies addressing vocational education and youth labor market transitions. However, comparative analysis between Chile and Spain required careful interpretation because the statistical classifications of vocational education, youth employment, and school-to-work transitions are not fully equivalent across national systems. Differences in definitions of vocational pathways, age cohorts, and labor market indicators may introduce distortions when interpreting trends across countries. Furthermore, the reliance on secondary data implies additional limitations: the analysis depends on the conceptual frameworks and methodological choices of the original producers of the data, which restricts the possibility of controlling for measurement biases or exploring micro-level processes such as individual decision-making, subjective expectations, or informal job search strategies. Consequently, the findings presented here should be interpreted primarily as an analytical synthesis of structural patterns rather than as a direct measurement of causal relationships at the individual level.

2 Technical-Professional Training in Chile

The origins of technical-professional education in Chile date back to the eighteenth century: “In December 1795 the Board of the Chilean Consulate created the Royal Academy of San Luis, carried out at the suggestion of Manuel de Salas” (Servat, 2017, p. 113).

Under the presidential leadership of Manuel Bulnes (1841-1851), the need arose to create “a school establishment that would teach industrial crafts in the areas of carpentry, blacksmithing, foundry, and mechanics” (Servat, 2017, p. 115), The School of Arts and Crafts was therefore created (Servat, 2017).

What is currently known in Chile as technical-professional secondary education (*enseñanza media técnico-profesional* or simply *EMTP* in Spanish) was designed as part of the educational reform of 1965, under the presidential leadership of Eduardo Frei Montalba. One of the principles that inspired this reform was the diversification and/or restructuring of the Chilean educational system. Two modalities were established in secondary education: a scientific humanist one and a technical-professional one. The objective of the latter was “to enable the student to perform the different crafts and technical functions required by the economic, social, and cultural development of the country and prepare him for the continuation of higher studies” (Hernández, 2015, p. 8).

This type of education did not undergo significant changes until 1998. That year, a set of transformations was put into place in its curricular structure. At the beginning of the 1990s, more than a third of the enrollment in secondary education in Chile was technical-professional.

Already at that time its main shortcomings were highlighted as:

- technological lag (of its teachers and technical equipment);
- dissociation with the productive sector;
- excessive specialization; and
- lack of relevance to the job market (Cariola, 1995).

Ministry of education (*Ministerio de Educación* [MINEDUC]) states that "the main purpose of this type of education is to promote successful transitions of young people from the educational system into the world of work" (2018, p. 6); in this sense, the *EMTP* constitutes a first step towards acquiring the technical tools that prepare students for working life.

Currently, the *EMTP* comprises 15 economic sectors, 35 specializations, and 17 minors, consisting of the following: Administration (administration and accounting); Agriculture (farming); Food (industrial food production and gastronomy); Textiles (clothing and textile manufacturing); Construction (construction, sanitary facilities, industrial assembly, and refrigeration and air conditioning); Electricity (electricity and electronics); Graphic Design (graphics and technical drawing); Hospitality and Tourism (tourism and hotel services); Lumber (forestry, furniture, and wood finishes); Maritime (aquaculture, port operations, fisheries, merchant and specialized ship crews); Metalworking (industrial mechanics, metal constructions, automotive mechanics, aircraft maintenance mechanics); Mining (mining activity, extractive metallurgy, geological data collection); Chemistry and Industry (industrial chemistry); Health and Education (nursing and early childhood care); and Technology and Communications (connectivity and networks, programming and telecommunications) (MINEDUC, 2018).

In Chile, there are 11,749 educational establishments dedicated to basic and secondary education, of which, 5,196 are municipal (public and free), 5,866 are private subsidized (with co-payment), 617 are private schools (paid), and 70 are delegated administration corporations. (MINEDUC, 2018). Of this total, 2,639 are scientific humanist secondary education establishments and 1,628 are technical-professional educational establishments (MINEDUC, 2018); The latter includes: 462 commercial institutes, 517 industrial schools, 454 technical schools, 154 agricultural schools, 39 maritime schools, and 2 artistic schools.

The total enrollment of technical-professional establishments amounts to 267,859 students, of whom 125,266 attend municipal establishments, 114,367 attend subsidized private establishments, and 28,226 attend delegated administration corporations. A significant fact is that there are no private technical-professional schools in the country (MINEDUC, 2018).

"64% of the *EMTP* student population consists of youth that come from families from the two poorest quintiles and 60% of the lyceums that provide technical education are in the decile of greatest vulnerability" (Sepúlveda, 2017, p. 2). In this regard, Arias *et al.* (2015) propose the following: "Students and their families, from low socioeconomic levels, make complex decisions with little information" (p.13).

Data from MINEDUC (2018) indicate that, on average, 40% of the student body chooses a technical-professional establishment, however, that percentage increases to 56% in municipal education. Currently, 39% of the 3rd and 4th year of secondary education is technical-professional. It's important to consider that the decision to attend a technical-professional establishment is made by the family and not the young person; in this regard, Arias, *et al.* (2015) points to the following: "The decision to enroll in an *EMTP* program, which is made in the eighth grade of primary school, is mainly determined by the family's socioeconomic context, which plays an even more important role than academic performance" (p.3).

Another particularity to consider is the *EMTP* graduation rate: 40% of degree candidates do not obtain a degree (Oyarzún, 2013) because they do not carry out their workplace internship. Technical professional (TP) lyceums must be responsible for ensuring this training opportunity for their students in companies in order to demonstrate that the training they provide is linked to market requirements.

3 Technical-Professional (Vocational) Training in Spain

The first initiative in Spain to create a standardized system of vocational training appears in the Statutes of Industrial Education and Vocational Training of 1924 and 1928, respectively. The latter established a network of centers to respond to the training needs of workers after the process of reindustrialization that followed the First World War. Since then, some compelling milestones have been:

1. In 1932, the Directorate-General of Vocational and Technical Education was created with the mission, among others, of updating and perfecting the 1928 Statute.
2. From 1939 to 1942, only the Trade Union Organization, highly mediated by political power, played a significant role in vocational training, which consisted of organizing its own network of centers: six in 1940, rising to 70 in 1950.
3. In 1955, the Law of Industrial Vocational Training was enacted, which replaced the Statute of 1928 and promoted vocational education as part of the general educational system. Apprenticeship Schools and Schools of Industrial Mastery were created, which over time would be called National Vocational Training Centers and Polytechnic Institutes.
4. The Ministry of Labor promoted the creation of a network of "labor universities" (Law 40/1959) and later (1964), technical engineering ones; these "universities" offered vocational training as well as technical upper secondary school education. In 1971, there were 17 such "universities" serving more than 17,000 students. In addition to the Ministries of Education and Labor, the following organizations were also closely linked to vocational training for young people and adults, always in the professional fields that their competencies encompassed: the Ministry of Agriculture, the Undersecretary of the Merchant Marine, and the Military Ministries (Land, Sea and Air). For its part, the Church and various private entities continued to have training centers that offered, generally speaking, teachings approved by the educational authorities.
5. In 1970, the General Education Law was approved, extending the Basic General Education (*EGB* in Spanish) to the entire population aged 6-14 and eliminating the early division between academic and professional studies. Subsequently, the 1990 Organic Law on the General Organization of the Educational System (*LOGSE* in Spanish) extended basic education to 16 years of age—the legal minimum age for entering the workforce—and standardized the Regulated Vocational Training System.
6. The General Council for Vocational Training prepared the National Vocational Training Program (1993-1996), with the aim of coordinating and integrating the existing Vocational Training Subsystems into a larger Vocational Training System. The 1996 Basic Agreement on vocational training policies included the basic principles and general outline of the new program, and served as the framework of reference for the Vocational Training Policy until the New National Vocational Training Program went into effect in 1998.

Currently and broadly speaking, the Spanish vocational training system has the following structure:

a) The Initial/Regulated Vocational Training Subsystem (included in the *LOGSE* law), which falls under the responsibility of the educational administrations (general or autonomous). It is aimed, first and foremost, at youth, but is also open to adults that wish to obtain the corresponding academic degrees under the classification of lifelong learning.
b) The Occupational Vocational Training Subsystem (*Formación Profesional Ocupacional*), aimed at unemployed workers. This system depends on the Labor Administrations and its objective is to promote job placement and labor reintegration of the job-seeking population, by means of the qualification, retraining, or updating of their professional competencies, which can be accredited by means of the corresponding certifications.
c) The Continuing Professional Development Subsystem, aimed at employed workers. This includes the actions carried out by companies, workers, or their respective organizations, aimed both at improving competencies and qualifications and at retraining employed workers, thus increasing the competitiveness of companies in terms of the social, professional, and personal development of workers.

These professional development initiatives allow for: updating and creating new titles that respond to the real needs of the job market; expanding the access routes to these studies and the bridges with other more academic degrees; enabling new training channels that accommodate a diversity of personal circumstances through distance learning and procedures for evaluating and accrediting professional competencies based on work experience; facilitating workplace-based training; and promoting networking with companies.

New structures and a job market with high demands have boosted the increase in intermediate and advanced degrees in vocational training by almost 50% from the 2007-2008 academic year to the 2015-2016 academic year, going from 451,541 students to 719,087 respectively (with 824,281, enrolled in the 2018-2019 academic year). Similarly, during this same period, enrollment in distance learning for vocational training went from 10,951 students to 57,931, offering 101 degrees through the e-learning platform, and since 2012, including the dual vocational training program, regulated by Royal Decree 1529/2012, of November 8, which also outlines the training and apprenticeship contracts.

In any case, and despite the increase in enrollment, Spanish vocational education and training (VET) continues to lag far behind the trend in developed countries. A recent Eurostat survey shows that, in 2016, those enrolled in vocational training represented 35% of the total number of students in Spain in their age groups. In comparison with this figure, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) average is 44% and rises to 48% in the European Union. On the other hand, a study prepared by Cedefop, an EU agency, calculated a few months ago that by 2030, the new jobs created in our country will require 65% of professionals with an intermediate VET degree and 35% with high qualifications, including university degrees and advanced vocational training.

Regulated vocational training currently offers more than 150 training programs within 26 professional areas, with theoretical and practical content suitable to each professional field. Within each professional sector, the following studies are offered:

- basic vocational training programs, which lead to the corresponding basic professional degree and offer compulsory and free courses;

- intermediate degree training programs, which lead to a technician degree and pertain to post-compulsory secondary education; and
- advanced degree training programs, which lead to an advanced technician degree and pertain to higher education studies.

Basic vocational training focuses on the compulsory secondary education stage (in which a technology subject is introduced) and upper secondary school education (with tracks for specific careers and optional subjects), in addition to promoting career guidance.

The *intermediate and advanced degrees in vocational training*, which vary in their duration and modular structure, are facing an important qualitative change in the transition from a system that traditionally values training to one that values professional competencies. Making it possible entails a significant level of participation of the productive sector, where students carry out part of their training (approximately 25%).

From a theoretical perspective, the dynamics observed in technical-professional education can be interpreted through several complementary approaches. Life course theory highlights how early educational choices—such as enrollment in technical-professional tracks—shape young people's subsequent educational and occupational trajectories, influencing their transitions from school to work. At the same time, labor market segmentation theory suggests that vocational education may channel students into specific segments of the labor market, often characterized by differentiated levels of stability, wages, and opportunities for mobility. Finally, social reproduction approaches emphasize how educational systems can reproduce existing social inequalities, as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in vocational tracks. Together, these perspectives provide an analytical framework for understanding how vocational education interacts with broader social structures, institutional arrangements, and labor market opportunities.

4 Dilemmas Linked to the Educational-Occupational System

In this section, we examine the options that young people face during their period of training, in terms of their social integration through the world of work.

4.1 Opting for Vocational Training

The choice to undertake technical vocational training is often conditioned by the students' cultural context and the economic possibilities of the family environment, rather than by students' actual callings. In the two countries analyzed, this option of training has traditionally been considered as marginal and not very prestigious.

In the case of Chile, the *EMTP* has historically been considered the poor family member of the Chilean educational system because those enrolled are the poorest young people in the country, its quality is low, and the technical degree is undervalued in the Chilean job market. In this regard, the Chilean Education Quality Agency [Agencia de Calidad de la Educación] (2016) states the following: "Regarding the educational opportunities received by those who choose less prestigious modalities, there is abundant comparative evidence that undertaking technical studies negatively impacts the academic results of students" (p. 10).

In the case of Spain, a survey by the Fundación Atresmedia and the Fundación MAPFRE recently revealed that, in our country, VET did not obtain a passing score; it received a 4.82 out of 10, while upper secondary school education is valued at 7.61 points and university at 8.32.

Our reality, however, is changing rapidly and a person's training plays a crucial role in their possibilities of securing a job. Thus, the data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE, 2019) indicate that the highest unemployment rates are registered in groups with basic training and that the highest rates of employment activity are registered in people who have completed upper secondary education and have been trained in science, mechanics and electronics, manufacturing and construction, agriculture, and health and social services. The revision of the map of vocational training offerings in Spain (2011) also underscores these facts, indicating that the increase in unemployment has had a higher incidence in people with a lower level of training (20.5% in illiterate people or those who only possess primary education; 15.6% for people with secondary education; and only 7.3% for people with higher education); at the same time it indicates that the time it takes for those seeking jobs to find work is inversely proportional to their level of education. In the *Education at a Glance* 2017 report, the OECD also pointed out that countries with well-established VET programs are more effective in the fight against youth unemployment, which in Spain borders on 34%, compared to 6.1% in Germany.

In any case, job placement no longer depends only on your level of training, but also on the level of professional competency achieved, which requires permanent ongoing development in order to be able to respond to competitive and uncertain contexts which require new competencies in order to adapt to new professional demands and new jobs.

One must also keep in mind that the opening of national borders is promoting positive effects on the reinvigoration of vocational technical training. For example, in the case of Spain, the fact that any European citizen can practice his or her profession in any EU country has helped push for changing the system of qualifications for it to be recognized within the EU, so that Spanish citizens can compete on equal terms with their neighboring countries.

4.2 Whether to Continue Studying After Basic Vocational Training

In the case of Chile, even though the 1965 educational reform already set forth that *EMTP* students could continue on to advanced studies, in practice, most of the students (and their families) strive for immediate integration into the world of work upon finishing their studies. It's no coincidence that the majority of *EMTP* students come from the poorest quintiles of the population; the normal and natural expectation has therefore been to enter the workforce as soon as possible in order to provide financially for one's family or rather to emancipate oneself from it.

With the passing of the years, this immediate transition into the world of work is occurring less and less frequently. Many *EMTP* degree candidates choose to continue with advanced studies, in technical training centers or in traditional universities, in fields of study that have no relation to the technical specialization that they earned. In this sense,

> "The discourse of the EMTP program as a non-terminal modality which is valid for continuing one's studies can only be sustained to the extent that this type of education strengthens its academic content and is coordinated with ESTP [programs][1] (Sevilla, *et al.*, 2014, p.85)."

One could argue that, currently in Chile, there is a:

> "new conception of ETP [technical-professional education] that definitively distances it from the image of terminal studies that prepare [the student] for a specific job position and that make it a viable option, through the creation of educational tracks from the secondary level to the post-secondary level (Sevilla, et al., 2014, p. 84)."

As Sevilla *et al.* (2014), note, the transition from *EMTP* to higher education is neither easy nor automatic given that:

> "The secondary and tertiary educational levels are weakly connected, both in institutional and curricular terms, which makes it difficult for degree candidates to move from the technical-professional modality to the higher education system. Less than 40% of EMTP graduates enter Higher Education in the first two years (p. 85)."

In this regard, Castro (2010) states that "one of the critical issues of technical education in general is the lack of 'bridges' between EMTP and higher education" (p.79).

Another important fact to consider is the *EMTP* graduation rate, given that: "A significant percentage of its degree candidates do not graduate, because they do not carry out their professional practice" (Sevilla *et al.*, 2014, p. 85)

In the case of Spain, there is a high level of continuity between the intermediate and advanced degree tracks, but it is very low (under 10%) between the latter and university studies. For the 2013-2014 academic year, the graduation rate for the Intermediate Degree was 75.6% (MECD, 2015). It's important to note that there are professional areas with high percentages of women: Personal Image, Sociocultural and Community Services and Healthcare. Meanwhile, there are higher percentages of men in Installation and Maintenance, Transport and Vehicle Maintenance, and Electricity and Electronics. On the other hand, the employment prospects for vocational training students are 73%, five points higher than the general average, and are especially high for those with higher vocational training (82%) compared to those with intermediate vocational training (72.7%). Compared to people with lower educational levels, vocational training graduates have a clear advantage: in the case of young people aged 25 to 29, the employment rate for the latter is only 58.4%, according to the Madrid Chamber of Commerce (2025).

4.3 Access to the World of Work and the Value of a Degree

Various studies (Cariola, 1995; Contreras, *et al.*, 2004; Vargas, *et al.*, 2006; Servat, 2007; Sevilla, *et al.*, 2009; Jakubowski, *et al.*, 2010; Ortiz, 2011; Amaral, *et al.*, 2018) point out that Chilean technical education is used as a resource for getting out of poverty; however, two years after finishing their studies, less than 30% of alumni work in the their areas of specialization, there is therefore an clear gap between the technical preparation for employment and real access to the world of work.

We believe that a significant part of the problem is related to the establishment of two highly differentiated tracks (academic and professional) that in turn establish differences and distinct priorities. In this sense, ways to reduce the aforementioned problems include establishing a greater link between the two educational tracks and achieving job success for technical training graduates.

In Spain, since the early 1990s, the educational administration and the labor administration have been in charge of renewing the educational offerings—of both educational tracks—in collaboration with certain social players, such as unions and employers, during the process of identifying the professional profiles and qualifications that are really in demand in systems of production. Likewise, the two share methodologies and stages, such as the sector studies carried out every three years.

The renewal of the offerings of Regulated and Occupational Vocational Training is carried out from the joint territorial and sectoral perspective. First, the aim is to adapt the educational offerings to the needs of the given context, offering only those specializations that are truly in demand in a specific context. Second, the aim is to adapt the educational offerings to the qualification needs of each sector by obtaining information on the economic, technological, employment and training

dimensions of each of the 28 production sectors studied; this is done by using the Sub-Directorate General of Occupational Training Management of the National Institute of Employment (*INEM* in Spanish).

In any case, the Basic and General Vocational Training Systems have been joined together in order to facilitate the subsequent incorporation of students into intermediate or advanced training programs. The *LOGSE* also promotes proximity between the business world and educational centers through public-private educational actions that allow for workplace internships and enable students to absorb the reality of the professional world, in its technical and socio-occupational aspects, thus gaining new knowledge and skills that can only be acquired by working.

4.4 The Value of the Degree and Informal Employment

In addition to the previous problem, in Chile "the EMTP's low visibility contributes to the lack of indicators that shed light on the results obtained by students in terms of acquired competencies, as well as their potential opportunities in the spheres of education and employment" (Larrañaga, *et al.*, 2013, p. 2).

In addition, the study carried out by Amaral, *et al.* (2018) concludes the following:

> "1. lack of an integrated technical-professional education (ETP in Spanish) system;
> 2. poor ability to identify and respond to the present and future demand for skills;
> 3. weak involvement of the productive sector in technical-professional training (FTP in Spanish);
> 4. difficulties in developing a range of qualifications that respond to the needs of the productive sector, individuals, and society, and in bringing them together in flexible learning modalities;
> 5. the need to establish more qualifications and curricula in educational-occupational tracks; and
> 6. the need for a greater ability to ensure the quality of FTP and to promote its continuous improvement (Amaral, et al., 2018, p. 7-18)."

For his part, Sepúlveda (2017) states that:

> "A discussion on technical professional education according to the current reality in our country should consider, at least, the following areas of reflection:
> - specifying the objective and perspectives of a technical education system, particularly in the field of secondary education;
> - addressing problems involving the management and organization of the currently existing scholastic educational offerings among the different systems of technical training, proposing viable alternatives for their development;
> - tackling—via a critical approach—the reproductive logic that this educational system highlights regarding the job market; and
> - facing development challenges, which involves a vision of education as an active policy that contributes to this task and not as a system that is organized based solely on the demand of employers (p. 3-4)."

We are therefore faced with the dilemma of young people who are technically preparing to enter the world of work, which does not welcome them as expected; not only that, but informality and precariousness characterizes youth employment in Chile.

Informal employment is defined by the Ministry of Economy, Development, and Tourism of Chile (2018) as a

> "set of units dedicated to the production of goods or the provision of services with the primary purpose of creating jobs and generating income for the people who participate in this activity. These units typically operate on a small scale, with a rudimentary organization, in which there is little, if any, distinction between labor and capital as factors of production. Employment relationships—where they exist—are instead based on casual employment, kinship, or relationships (p. 3)."

For their part, the ILO and PREALC define informal employment as "underemployment that affects those workers who fail to enter the modern economy" (Sáez, 2013, p. 17-18); most of them are young.

Most informal employment in Chile focuses on so-called *micro-entrepreneurs:* that is, self-employed workers who don't have security or social protection. A brief characterization of *micro-entrepreneurs* is provided by the Ministry of Economy, Development and Tourism (2018) in the following terms:

> "- There are 1,992,578 micro-entrepreneurs in Chile, 52.2% of which are informal workers.
> - The main places where informal businesses are carried out are the client's home or business (21.9%), the street or public spaces (21.2%), and inside a home without installations (18.3%).
> - On average, 78.2% of informal businesses do not have more than one worker (not including the owner).
> - In 2017, 73.2% of informal micro-entrepreneurs did not make any kind of contribution to the social security system. (p. 1-2)."

According to the protected employment index, prepared by the Fundación SOL (Narbona, *et al.*, 2011), "currently only 39% of those employed nationwide have a protected job—that is, with an indefinite contract in writing, payment of wages and salary, and contributions for pension, health, and unemployment insurance" (p. 3).

We therefore have a country that "has modified its productive structure, increasing the relative importance of mining and financial and business services, to the detriment of the manufacturing industry and the agricultural and forestry sectors, and with these changes it is moving towards strong productive heterogeneity" (FLACSO/IPS, 2017, p. 12); nonetheless, young people continue to be trained in productive areas that are in decline.

In other words, young Chileans experience the paradox forecast by CEPAL in 2007: we are faced with generations that are more educated and better-prepared for work but that, paradoxically, are more excluded from it. Today's young Chileans have received more schooling than their parents and even more so than their grandparents, but that higher level of schooling does not ensure them a job.

In García's words: "young people have the enormous pressure to participate in the adult world that promotes their productive insertion while also eliminating their real opportunities for income, stability, and participation in social and economic power" (Rojas, 2011, p. 172).

Informal employment gives rise to job insecurity, which, according to Vejar (2018) has five dimensions:

a) job instability,
b) job insecurity,
c) inadequate salaries,
d) risky working conditions, and
e) excessive working hours (p. 4).

The aforementioned problems of informal employment are not as evident in Spain, where there is a better-established system of labor controls; but, as a consequence of the economic and financial crisis that was uncovered starting in 2009 and which, in part, continues to this day, Spain is affected by a high level of job insecurity, leading to the term *mileurista* (those who earn less than €1,000 euros a month) and has fostered heated social debates about workers' minimum wage.

4.5 Some Consequences

From the previous points, serious problems arise for job placement among youth: in the case of Spain, due to a general lack of jobs for all those who need to work, and in the case of Chile, due to a lack of adequate preparation.

As Weller (2006) points out:

> "A gap between the characteristics of education and the labor demand tends to close the channel of social mobility... poor, early, or late job placement, frequently related to high levels of school dropouts, mainly affects young people from poor households, with which there is a high probability of an intergenerational transmission of poverty… young people with precarious job placement make up a significant part of the at-risk population, with adaptation problems and social marginalization (p. 10)."

In this sense, in addition to the frustration generated by having studied a technical course and not being able to put it into practice due to not having a job, the gap between technical-professional training and job insecurity among youth generates a series of consequences for young people. These include: prolonging young people's dependency on their families due to the continuation of higher education (which also does not guarantee adequate or successful job placement); indefinite postponement of building one's own family; postponement or renunciation of having children; difficulty or impossibility of having a home of one's own; and entering into debt in order to cover personal expenses.

The ILO Report (2015) reaffirms the above, stating the following:

> "In Latin American countries, the levels of youth in informal employment cover a wide range (…). The consequences of insertion into the informal economy have implications for workers that go beyond the scope of the employment relationship. Lower wages, job instability, precarious working conditions, lack of coverage associated with social security, and absence of representation and social dialogue classify informal workers as a vulnerable group and with severe limitations for personal and family development (p. 8)."

In addition to the above, we must take into account that some studies (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Manyika, *et al.*, 2017) indicate that many current jobs will cease to exist as a result of the use of robots, the internet of things, and artificial intelligence.

"We estimate that up to 375 million workers worldwide (14% of the global workforce) will likely have to move to new occupational categories and learn new skills in the event of rapid adoption of automation" (Manyika, *et al.*, 2017, p. 4). For its part, the report entitled *The Future of Employment*, carried out by Oxford University professors Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne, states that 47% of all employment is at high risk.

The industrial sector is the most affected, along with the administration and services: trades such as cashiers, travel agents, vendors, assemblers, secretaries, electricians, toolmakers, turners, and auto mechanics. In general, workers in the transport and logistics sector, as well as administrative officers and everything related to office work, manufacturing, and production processes are likely to be replaced by information technology in a few more years.

The tragic thing about this situation is that in all these areas, trades, and specializations, Chilean and Spanish youth are currently being trained: that is, they are being trained for jobs that will soon cease to exist. As Mayinka, *et al.* (2017) points out, "60% of occupations are comprised of at least 30% constitutive work activities that could be automated" (p.4).

5 Dilemmas Linked to the Design and Development of Training Programs

Problems concerning training and its usefulness are not only structural, but also relate to the educational systems that are applied and the conditions that contextualize them—aspects that we briefly review below.

5.1 Educational Curriculum and Professional Internships

Good competency-based professional preparation is closely linked to educational models that provide practical references; in this case, we are referring to recurring methodologies or ones that are linked to real-life cases and professional workplace internships. What's more, very practical educational programs also appeal to young people who seek instant results from their effort and who prioritize utility over depth of training.

One of the successes of the dual educational programs put into practice in both countries as well as the significant clout that curricular practices have in Spain, lies in their connection to real-life situations that makes learning more up-to-date, attractive, and—without a doubt—stimulating for the student.

On the other hand, it's impossible to forget the socio-educational dimension, which is also linked to professional practices and which is related as much to the implementation of soft skills (discipline at work, ability to connect with co-workers, teamwork, etc.) as with the professionalizing objective in a broader sense, referring fundamentally to the context in which workers operate and to their condition as consumers or subjects that have rights and duties inherent to their condition, either as workers or entrepreneurs. We cannot and should not ignore the fact that the students' internships are carried out in places of work and they enable students to absorb the reality of the professional world, in its technical and socio-occupational aspects, thus gaining new knowledge and skills that can only be acquired by working.

5.2 Teaching Staff and the School

The teacher serves not only as an intermediary in the didactic relationship between knowledge and the students, but also as a professional and a expert in the specialization that they master and teach. With this in mind, it's important to have teachers who can be academic—who are capable of providing reasons for what is done and why it is done—as well as professional—who are familiar with context of workplace internships and therefore also with the specifics of educational and social transfer processes.

An important role that teachers play concerning students who are at risk for dropping out of school is in their efforts in providing personal, academic, and professional guidance. As is often said, the foundations of this guidance are the classroom and the teacher, who can directly detect and deal with the issues that concern the student; also, if more widespread problems are present, the teachers can count on the school's counseling services and, if necessary, state-based ones as well.

In the case of Spain, the training programs include among their contents a module on job training and orientation (FOL in Spanish) for each specialization; the school guidance departments collaborate on developing this module, taking advantage of information career guidance services. One important subject belonging to this module touches on how to build up one's résumé, self-

employment, the development of the social economy, new sources of employment, the prevention of occupational hazards, and environmental conservation.

If it is important for schools to work in and with companies, it is no less necessary for them to share their experiences with other schools and to plan out the educational offerings in this way at a national level. The goal continues to be to train good professionals and achieve high levels of job placement.

6 Conclusions

From a comparative perspective, the cases of Chile and Spain reveal both convergent structural challenges and important institutional differences in the relationship between vocational education and youth labor market integration. In both contexts, vocational training operates as a key institutional mechanism shaping school-to-work transitions, particularly for young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the effectiveness of this pathway is mediated by the structure of national labor markets, the degree of coordination between education systems and productive sectors, and the social prestige attached to vocational tracks. In Chile, vocational secondary education is strongly associated with socioeconomic vulnerability and early labor market entry, which often results in unstable or informal employment trajectories. In contrast, although vocational education in Spain has historically suffered from lower symbolic prestige compared to academic pathways, recent reforms and stronger institutional coordination have increasingly positioned it as a strategic component of upper secondary education and workforce development.

These differences can be interpreted through the theoretical lenses employed in this study. From a life-course perspective, early educational tracking significantly shapes young people's subsequent opportunities, often reinforcing unequal starting conditions. Labor market segmentation theory helps explain why vocational graduates frequently enter secondary or more precarious segments of the labor market, particularly in contexts with weak institutional regulation or high levels of informality. Finally, social reproduction approaches highlight how vocational education systems may unintentionally reproduce existing social inequalities when access to different educational tracks is strongly conditioned by socioeconomic background. Taken together, the comparative evidence suggests that vocational training alone cannot guarantee successful labor market integration; rather, its effectiveness depends on broader institutional arrangements linking education, economic structures, and social protection systems.

Consequently, strengthening vocational education requires not only improving the quality of training programs but also reinforcing institutional bridges between education and employment, expanding opportunities for upward educational mobility, and addressing structural inequalities that shape young people's life trajectories. Without these broader reforms, vocational training risks remaining a pathway that channels socially vulnerable youth into segmented and precarious labor markets rather than functioning as an effective mechanism of social mobility.

Some of the dilemmas highlighted here continue to pose trials and challenges for the systems and students. Some challenges that Chile and Spain have in common are:

- Vocational training is linked to the social and economic development of countries and requires greater recognition and social prestige, which involves improving the quality of studies and disseminating their strengths.

- Intermediate levels of vocational training must be equipped with greater technological development in order to take on the challenges of a digitized society. We cannot continue preparing young people for an industrial society that no longer exists.
- Greater and better coordination must be achieved between technical-professional training and the national productive sector, so that the technical training received by young people makes sense and contributes to the development of the country.
- We must strengthen the focus on soft skills because they are crucial to job market success; we must also consider and develop the skills and competencies necessary and sufficient to succeed in the knowledge and information society (learning to learn, conflict resolution, teamwork, networking, etc.).
- From a policy perspective, these findings raise the need to reconcile technical training with equitable development strategies, particularly in contexts of increasing digitalization and labor market polarization.
- Improving the quality of the technical training provided is crucial in order to boost the prestige of technical-professional establishments and thus increase the ratings of technical degrees throughout the country.
- Maintaining and enhancing the link between training programs and companies as well as other organizations in the job market is an ongoing task that we cannot neglect and that must be nurtured.
- It is necessary to maintain and enhance the relationship between academic and professional studies, guaranteeing both different and interconnected tracks.
- It is worth enriching and improving new dual training experiences and other training modalities (distance, blended, and night learning) that open new avenues for job training.

The first and foremost challenge facing ETP in Chile was pointed out by the country's current president, Sebastián Piñera, and consists of improving technical-professional education by creating technical-professional lyceums of excellence, and—at the level of advanced studies—promoting technical training centers and professional institutes and transforming them into quality institutions that are well-established within the productive world.

The aforementioned involves rapidly and continuously evolving and adapting to the changing reality of the productive sector; more specifically, vocational training must adapt to the digitization of work through artificial intelligence, given that, within the context of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, the rapid development of information and communication technologies is changing the service and productive sector at an unprecedented rate,

Another crucial aspect is training technicians who are able to properly function in the technological world, thus helping to alleviate the enormous deficit of human capital in the information and communications technology sector.

In this regard, a double challenge emerges; on the one hand, it is crucial to increase enrollment in specializations in the field of information and communications technology, and on the other, to ensure quality training for these students.

In the case of Spain, it is important to promote measures aimed at improving the quality of this educational stage and fostering its professional dimension. Some questions to consider include promoting mechanisms for the mutual integration of the Initial/Regulated Vocational Training Subsystem with the other subsystems, especially through the following: a modular structure of training programs adapted to the National Certification System; the development of integrated vocational training centers; and the creation and application of an optimal type of methodology for revising and updating the Catalog of Vocational Degrees.

And in both Spain and Chile, it is important to continue working to reinforce policies that promote equal opportunities, especially in regards to situations that affect groups that are vulnerable due to discrimination based on gender, disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.

We have no doubt that both countries (Chile and Spain) recognize the fundamental role of vocational training, not only as a tool for fighting unemployment, but also as a dynamizing factor in competitiveness, and, by extension, of the economy as a whole. For this reason, both countries have put forth multiple initiatives to establish legal changes that help regulate and adapt vocational training programs to technological innovations—which are increasingly frequent and numerous—and to new socio-political environments. These initiatives may either consist of specific targeted measures that affect a single subsystem or they may be global measures that concern the entire vocational training system.

In the case of Chile, and as evidence of its intention, the government proposed the "2018 ETP Modernization Agenda," which established seven points for modernizing technical-professional training in the country:

- the connection between intermediate technical-professional programs, advanced technical professional programs, and the productive sector;
- increasing the number of bicentennial lyceums to 300, with an emphasis on technical-professional education;
- the expansion of free education (project currently in Congress);
- the formation of the National Technical-Professional Council;
- strengthening internship grant programs as well as technical education postgraduate programs;
- implementing quality state technical training schools (CFTs in Spanish) that are relevant to the region; and
- incorporating specific quality standards and indicators for technical education.

In Spain, the goal is to increase vocational training opportunities, and in this context, the Spanish government plans to open 300,000 new vocational training places over the next five years. In fact, there has been significant growth in places, especially following the Organic Law on the Organization and Integration of Vocational Training of 2022, with an increase of 376,000 new places from 2022. At the same time, early school leaving, defined as those between the ages of 18 and 24 who only hold a Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) qualification, has increased from 17.8% in 2019 to 13% in 2024 (10% for women), compared to 9.5% in the European Union (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2025).

From a comparative perspective, both Chile and Spain reveal how vocational training is shaped by social stratification and institutional prestige. However, while in Chile vocational education is strongly associated with poverty and early labor market entry, in Spain it is increasingly positioned as a strategic alternative within upper secondary education, albeit still affected by symbolic devaluation. These differences reflect broader welfare and labor market regimes, influencing both expectations and outcomes of vocational pathways.

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MARIO SANDOVAL MANRÍQUEZ
Universidad de Los Lagos
Osorno, Chile, 52900000
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0271-7959
mario.sandoval@ulagos.cl

JOAQUÍN GAIRÍN SALLÁN
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Barcelona, España, 08001
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2552-0921
joaquin.gairin@uab.cat

Cite as:

Sandoval Manríquez, M. & Gairín Sallán, J. (2026). Dilemmas and Challenges in Job Placement Among Young Technical and Vocational Secondary Education Degree Candidates. Journal of Technical Education (JOTED), 14(1), 45–62.