

THE THREE SCENARIOS FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the implicit social implications of vocational curricula in the stigmatisation of students within vocational education and training (VET) systems in Europe. It examines how the symbolic power of society and educational agents influences the social perception of vocational pathways and contributes to the reproduction of inequality.

Grounded in a hermeneutic perspective, the study interprets the representations and discourses surrounding VET as social constructions shaped by values, beliefs, and institutional contexts. Based on documentary analysis, three scenarios were developed using the scenario-planning framework proposed by Snoek et al. (2004), structured around CEDEFOP's analytical axes: demographic change and participation, technological transformation of work, inclusion and equity, and the relationship between VET and the labour market.

The findings highlight that vocational education in Europe continues to mirror broader social hierarchies, functioning simultaneously as a site of opportunity and exclusion. The scenarios reveal how different policy and social trajectories may either reinforce or mitigate these dynamics.

By combining interpretative analysis and prospective reflection, the article contributes to a critical understanding of VET as both a social and political construct, offering insights for policy innovation and the promotion of a more inclusive European educational space.

KEYWORDS:

vocational education and training, curriculum, social reproduction, hermeneutics, scenario planning, CEDEFOP, educational inequality

INTRODUCTION

A European study published in 2020 by Cedefop shows the different scenarios for vocational education and training (VET), better known in Portugal as professional education and training, for the 21st century¹. From the trends inferred from a questionnaire administered to several Member States, the three areas of immediate intervention become clear: a focus on the student learning process, the improvement of curricular aspects, and the growth of this type of education and training at higher levels. On the one hand, the same study states that it is very difficult to find common points in VET across European Union countries, because the design and implementation of VET curricular policies are quite divergent and occur at different speeds. On the other hand, Cedefop managed to develop three scenarios for this type of education, looking at VET over at least two decades.

In general, the study shows that many of the representations of VET do not place this segment of education and training as the centre of reflection. Instead, it is the external factors that directly communicate with this education that have defined its identity and even its orientation from the point of view of curriculum policy. For example, “qualification requirements and strategic recruitment companies” (Cedefop, 2020: 199) should be defined by internal logics that inform VET, and not by external entities. Curricular and educational policies must also be internally designed and externally recognised in order to provide VET with a legal curricular body and a recognised educational entity.

Theoretical analysis

The scenarios presented by the European Union were designed based on the development of VET over the last two decades. We seek to understand the horizontal position of this educational segment in the general education system and its relationship with elements of more vocational or more academic training, typical of general courses. In the vertical dimension, what we want is to “distinguish between the two major developments identified: strengthening of VET, leading to what we called distinctive VET, and diversification of VET, leading to what we called pluralistic VET” (ibid.), that is, we look for the particularities that have changed in this

¹ Cedefop (2020). *Vocational education and training in Europe, 1995–2035: scenarios for European vocational education and training in the 21st century*. Cedefop reference series; No. 114. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/794471>

type of education over the years. The distinction between the two dimensions is merely artificial, since they are part of a single system that is increasingly marked by diversification, in a “pluralist” logic. The truth is that this same educational system has been blurring the line between vocational education and general education.

In seeking to understand the orientation of curricular policies regarding professional education, Cedefop carried out a deep analysis of the future of this education and outlined three scenarios that could occur until 2035 (ibid.: 227). Like this,

1. If the educational system is marked by a blurring of general education and vocational training, VET will become pluralistic. There will be sharing of vocational and academic content between both educational and training dimensions.
2. If VET diverges from general education and assumes itself as the main system of meaning, it will become hegemonic, that is, it will dominate the educational system (ibid.: 201).
3. If VET is marginalised, general education, such as a pathway to higher education, will dominate. In the case of secondary education, this has always been assumed to be a high school matrix with the guarantee of the hegemony of the academic curriculum, which has always excluded everything that was different, namely, technical and professional routes.

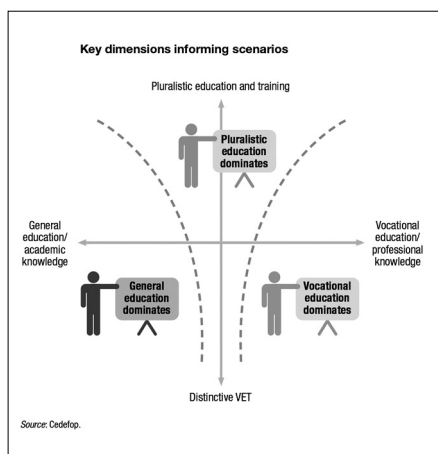


IMAGE 1. Main dimensions of VET scenarios

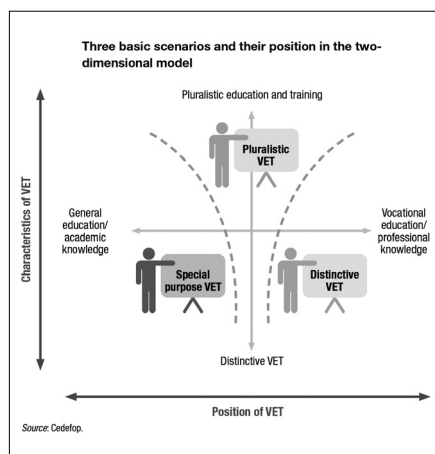


IMAGE 2. Three basic VET scenarios

Source: Adapted from Cedefop (2020). *Vocational education and training in Europe, 1995–2035: Scenarios for European vocational education and training in the 21st century*.

The three scenarios envisage:

- “(a) pluralistic VET has lifelong learning at its heart; the distinctions between vocational and general education become increasingly obsolete;
- (b) distinctive VET has occupational and professional competence at its heart; VET clearly differs from general education and dominates the education system, so we can speak of a ‘VET hegemony’;
- (c) special-purpose or ‘marginalised’ VET has job-oriented training at its heart; specific forms of VET have survived in an education system which is dominated by general and higher education.” (ibid.: 200)

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: SCENARIO PLANNING AND HERMENEUTIC INTERPRETATION

The scenarios developed in this study were constructed through a combination of documentary analysis and bibliographic review, underpinned by a systemic and interpretative framework supported by the hermeneutic method. This approach enabled a structured projection of the future of vocational education and training (VET) up to the year 2035.

Hermeneutics, as the science of interpretation, assumes that all understanding is mediated by the interpreter’s pre-understanding—a constellation of values, beliefs, and motivations that shape the interpretative act. Meaning, therefore, is not discovered but constructed through an iterative process of interpretation that constantly oscillates between the parts and the whole, a process often described as the *hermeneutic spiral*. Within this dynamic, the researcher acknowledges that inquiry is inevitably influenced by subjectivity: interpretation is both rational and affective, seeking to make sense not only of what is visible in the data but also of what remains implicit or concealed.

In this sense, scenario planning (also referred to as *scenario writing*) functions as both a prospective and participatory methodology and an interpretative exercise, combining analytical rigour with creative projection. Originally systematised by Snoek et al. (2004) in the European project *Scenario Writing in Education*, this method supports critical reflection on the future of educational systems and teaching and learning processes. It enables educators, researchers, and policymakers to explore plausible alternative futures, address uncertainty, and design adaptive

strategies for transformation.

The underlying epistemological premise of scenario planning is that the future is neither fixed nor predictable but plural, contingent, and shaped by multiple interacting forces. Rather than forecasting, the method aims to construct narrative representations of potential futures, exposing the driving forces behind educational change and fostering strategic reflection in the present. The participatory nature of the method engages stakeholders in collaborative processes that promote collective learning, reinterpretation of existing paradigms, and the co-construction of shared visions for the future of education.

Stages of the scenario planning process: the method unfolds in five interrelated stages:

1. Identification of key fields of change through the analysis of social, economic, technological, political, and cultural trends influencing education.
2. Selection of the most significant trends, differentiating between stable, predictable drivers and highly uncertain forces of change.
3. Definition of critical uncertainties, represented as two axes forming a two-dimensional matrix from which four alternative scenarios emerge.
4. Elaboration of detailed scenario narratives, which describe in consistent and plausible terms how educational systems, institutions, teachers, and learners might operate in each possible future.
5. Critical reflection and strategic orientation, focusing on identifying desirable futures and defining actions capable of steering current practices toward those preferred scenarios.

Construction of the Axes: Analytical Basis from CEDEFOP (2020): in this research, the axes for scenario construction were derived from the analytical framework established in CEDEFOP (2020), *Vocational education and training in Europe, 1995–2035: Scenarios for European vocational education and training in the 21st century*. This report, published by the European Commission, identifies the principal drivers and uncertainties that will shape the evolution of VET in Europe, providing a robust empirical foundation for scenario development.

Based on this framework, four structural axes were identified as central to envisioning the possible futures of education and training:

1. **Demographic Change and Participation** — This axis addresses demographic shifts, including population ageing and declining youth cohorts, examining their effects on the attractiveness and accessibility of VET. It also considers strategies for engaging new learner groups, such as adults undergoing career transitions and migrants, emphasising the need to ensure the long-term sustainability and social relevance of vocational education.
2. **Technological Innovation and Transformation of Work** — This dimension explores the influence of digitalisation, automation, and the green transition on skills development, labour market structures, and pedagogical practices. It allows the projection of divergent futures, from accelerated technological integration to scenarios marked by institutional inertia or unequal access to technological innovation.
3. **Inclusion, Flexibility, and Equity** — This axis focuses on the responsiveness of educational systems to diverse learner needs, emphasising flexibility, accessibility, and social justice. It contrasts potential futures characterised by inclusive, learner-centred models with those that perpetuate exclusion or reinforce social inequalities.
4. **Relationship between VET and the Labour Market** — This axis examines the degree of alignment between education and labour market demands, the level of employer involvement in training processes, and the credibility of qualifications. It highlights the tension between centralised regulation and local autonomy as a determinant of systemic adaptability and relevance.

By combining hermeneutic interpretation with scenario planning, this study adopts a reflexive and systemic approach to the understanding of educational futures. The hermeneutic perspective situates the scenario-building process within a broader interpretive context, acknowledging that the act of projecting futures is itself an interpretative construction rooted in present meanings and institutional realities.

Thus, the integration of CEDEFOP's analytical axes with the scenario planning methodology enables a scientifically grounded and contextually relevant foresight exercise, capable of translating complex trends and uncertainties into coherent, evidence-based narratives. This approach not only enhances the strategic capacity of educational institutions but also contributes to informed policymaking and the promotion of innovation in vocational education and training. In doing so, it positions scenario planning as a scientifically robust and reflexive tool for rethinking education in an era of accelerated social, technological, and economic transformation.

SCENARIOS FOR VET 2035

In **scenario 1**, we will have a **plural VET** whose basis is **lifelong learning**. According to the Cedefop study cited above, this will imply redefining the place that this segment of training and education occupies in the educational system. The following transformations are indicated: VET will no longer be seen as a “training subsystem, it will seek to combine professional skills [with general skills through] different forms of learning” (ibid.: 201).

In fact, as early as 1986, the acquisition of generalizable and transferable skills for the world of work, in its various applications, was advocated by bodies such as the OECD, the Council of Europe, UNESCO, the EU, the European Commission, the World Bank and the ILO (Azevedo, 2002: 220). It was these entities, always external, that announced at that time the new training requirements and the identity of VET.

The appreciation of general training took place in 1989, when the OECD suggested that vocational education should have a greater theoretical training component and that academic education should integrate vocational components into its curricula (ibid.: 221)— “The focus will be on overall skills and competence developments, not on VET as a separate sector.” (Cedefop, 2020: 201)

Transversal and strategic skills will contribute to better adaptation and personal, academic and professional success of students. They will also serve the development and validation of personal, emotional and cognitive skills and the training of enlightened citizenship and social responsibility. Transversal skills are necessary for good professional performance, regardless of initial or basic training. They are complementary to scientific training, necessary for the exercise of any profession. In this scenario, which is based on a perspective of VET as lifelong learning, the continuity of basic training is expected, which is evident in the existence of intermediate courses in higher education.

The well-known Higher Professional Technical Courses (CTeSP), regulated under the amendment of Decree-Law No. 63/2016, of 13 September, clearly establish this continuous relationship between secondary education and higher education. In the preamble of this regulation, regarding this connection, we can read that “the conditions will be created for them to fully play the role of short cycles of higher education associated with the first cycles (degrees).”

Scenario 2 is characterised by defining **professional and occupational skills** as priorities of the VET curricular policy, which is also ideological, that is, it is based

on the idea that the entire curricular design and its guiding political philosophy must be centred on **training for the profession**. This is where VET is linked as a subsystem, in a bipartite education logic. It is also here that educational stereotypes are assumed, that is, a distinction is made between “good” and “bad” students, according to the type of educational pathways followed, including, and according to the social origin of the young people.

The social division of knowledge will correspond to the social differentiation of work. This is the ideological strength of the curriculum: it provides a way of living and a vision of the world. In this world, knowledge is not certified, but class positions are determined within a logic of fatalism and social destiny. It is, at worst, the exercise of the formally accepted curriculum and serves social reproduction in the school environment.

The school model can appear in the form of two sub-models: “a bipartite sub-model and a comprehensive sub-model” (Azevedo, 2000: 31), in which, in the first, the different teaching paths (general, technical and professional education) are organized in their own schools, therefore they are sufficiently equidistant, from a social point of view, to the individual skills of the students, in order to mark what is done and who attends each of them. This sub-model is the most common in Europe. In the second, comprehensive sub-model, the different courses are hosted in the same space and the richness of curricular and, consequently, cultural and social diversity is concentrated in a single school. What is intended in this sub-model is to eliminate separatism in secondary education” (Rodrigues, 2012: 16–17 citing Goodson, 2001: 226).

What will define VET, in this framework, will be learning in a work context and this will be its first foundation and its ultimate justification. In this sense, parity with general education will be at stake, which had already been highlighted in the '90s:

“in 1993, *the Human Resources Outlook for the 1990s* (Azevedo, 2002: 227), regarding the relationship between professional training and education, suggested that students on technical and professional courses be made aware of the possibility of pursuing studies at higher education and the importance of continuity between initial and adult training. It also advised

greater parity between technical-professional courses and academic courses and that the qualifications acquired were promoted through the possibility of continuing studies” (Rodrigues, 2012: 17).

In this scenario, VET “will be organised around the requirements and identities of clearly defined and/or professions” (Cedefop, 2020: 203) and, the report continues, there will be a natural destination which will be the job market. Here too, the “balanced commitment” (ibid.) will be carried out between the State, employers and unions. The target audience will be young people and not people of all ages, as in scenario 1. Work, learning through practice, and active methods are VET regulatory concepts in a scenario in which social partners perform policy functions of governance and curriculum definition (ibid.).

At the level of European policies, “policy may support the distinct model by promoting cross-border cooperation and agreements on occupations and sectors, for example, defining common standards” (ibid.). Therefore, this scenario runs the risk of being overtaken by “rapidly changing technologies”, which alters the supposed “stability of occupations” (ibid.).

The last scenario, **scenario 3**, is based on **training for work and employability**, and not so much on the dynamics of training for general and transferable skills (scenario 1) and/or occupational and/or professional skills (scenario 2). In other words, this scenario meets the needs of the labour market and workers.

Essentially aimed at adults, marked by a dual education system logic, that is, brief and short-term courses, professional training, in this scenario, is carried out within a framework of knowledge updating, that is, within a logic of continuous training in a work context. However, “[...] it remains to be proven that the capacity of technical education and professional training to create employment depends on the quality of the mechanical relationship that is established between the expansion of its supply and its employability” (Azevedo, 2002: 132).

This vision of training for work and employability has a more conservative basis in relation to other scenarios and clearly identifies the place that VET occupies in educational systems: it is aimed at workers, and the curriculum policy has at its heart the concerns of employability. Thus, as an objective and political support, the curricular dimension of VET seeks to respond to “groups at risk. [...] Employability in the broader sense, empowering people to develop in a lifelong learning perspective, is taken over by general education at all levels” (Cedefop, 2020: 204). As the job market is volatile, training, in this scenario, will be of short

duration and professional skills will be adjusted to the jobs available. Transversal skills will be left to the responsibility of teaching in the general high school tradition, and the focus is on the development of specific skills for employability.

The following image, prepared by Cedefop, illustrates well the differences between the three scenarios for vocational education and training in Europe.

Table 8. Overview of key features of the three basic scenarios

	Pluralistic VET	Distinctive VET	Special purpose VET
How is VET understood?	VET is understood as vocationally and labour-market-oriented learning at all levels and in all institutional settings.	VET is understood as being focused on entry into occupations and professions, enabling specialisation, but also open to renewal and innovation.	VET is understood as employability in a narrow sense, ability to respond to groups at risk.
What is VET's position in the wider education and training system?	VET focuses on overall skills and competence development, not on VET as a separate sector.	VET is a separate education and training subsystem with clearly defined providers and institutions. Learning at workplaces is a key feature.	VET is increasingly linked to continuing and further training in the labour market.
What is VET's key organising principle?	VET is anchored in broader qualification profiles with a weaker link to specific occupations and jobs.	VET is organised around clearly defined occupations/professions ensuring close links to the labour market.	VET focuses on short and medium-term skills needs.
Who is it for?	Learners of all ages.	Young people in IVET.	Adults in need of re- or upskilling.
What type of pathways?	Flexible pathways; possibility to transfer broader skills sets across different types of education and training.	Work-based learning stands out as the 'gold standard' across occupational areas and at all levels including EQF 8.	Shorter training courses, increasingly offered through open educational resources.
What type of provision?	Individually tailored learning solutions, project- and problem-focused learning.	Work- and practice-based learning is given a priority.	Short training courses mainly in classrooms and workshops, with some on-the-job-training.

Source: Cedefop.

IMAGE 3. Key elements of the three basic scenarios

Source: Adapted from Cedefop (2020). *Vocational education and training in Europe, 1995–2035: Scenarios for European vocational education and training in the 21st century.*

THE CASE OF PORTUGAL

In the case of Portugal, between 1995 and 2015, great efforts were made to improve this training and education route. Since the 1990s, the country has made extensive efforts to combat youth unemployment. Youth unemployment, in 2015, was 30%, and this forced the State to take decisions to improve the provision of social inclusion for young people and, for this reason, it clearly invested in professional qualification, including through CTeSP. In other words, Portugal sought, in some way, to initiate a political path of pluralistic VET (scenario 1), which served all ages, based on general and transversal skills, and with a political framework oriented towards lifelong learning.

Aligned with macro-curricular policies, that is, EU educational guidelines, Portugal understood that, after the 2008 crisis, VET qualification had to be aimed not only at younger people, but also at older adults, who were already in the labour market. It also understood that a greater balance was needed between professional skills and transversal skills, typical of a general education that needs to find its vocational skills—“No general training can dispense with preparation for a professional skill, no professional training can dispense with consolidation of basic skills provided by general education” (Azevedo, 2000: 224)”.

The defence of diverse curricular offerings in Portuguese schools meant that young people were called upon to build their own educational path, which meant “strengthening individuality and optionality” (idem, 1998: 87). Knowledge was thus realised as options in a model that refused to allow certain subjects to belong solely to this or that educational subsystem. This means and indicates, nowadays, that knowledge is not closed, nor stagnant in a certain type of school or curriculum.

“In fact, what seems to me to be at stake is the need to invent a new curriculum that allows young people (...) personal and social development appropriate to their personal potential and expectations, preparation for the exercise of responsible citizenship and active citizenship, in a context in which the economy and companies have changed a lot, professions have evolved a lot and professional careers have become unpredictable butterfly flights” (idem, 1996: 88).

THE IMPACT OF VET SCENARIOS IN EUROPE

VET cannot, nor should it, have job training as its sole concern, but it should not be distanced from it. It seems to me that we should look at learning as oriented towards the development of general and professional, transferable skills, as “(...) the mercantile spirit also presents drawbacks. Human perspectives are limited, and when all a person’s attention is focused on one seventeenth of a pin or one eightieth of a button, he becomes stupid. Education is neglected” (Smith, A., 2006, p. 28).

Scenario 2 is clearly organised according to educational principles of training strongly focused on the profession. In this sense, its purpose is occupational. We return, in some way, to a past that recalls the technical training objectives of the conservative and dictatorial regime that governed Portugal until 25 April, 1974, and which aimed to have a specialised technical body capable of carrying out the country’s industrialisation process. The problem, from an ideological point of view, is no less serious. Soon after, in a past that we can place in the 1980s, the defence of technical-professional education was based on a non-general formal education that sought to serve the interests of the State, both at an economic level and in terms of its technological development. Thus, this type of education was organised according to production, in the “Taylorist-Fordist ²way of the capitalist production system” (Azevedo, 2000: 189), which required individualised technical staff, ready to make their contribution to the progress of a poor and economically constrained country, in a scrupulously hierarchical social division of labour.

Especially because “mass teaching, (...) inspired by Taylor’s scientific management model (...), came to respond to the type of man that the new production model needed: the general idea of bringing together multitudes of students (subject-prima) destined to be processed by teachers (workers) in a central school (factory) was a demonstration of industrial genius” (Sousa, 2004: 166). It was the need for labour duly regulated by the State in the face of an ideology of human capital (Azevedo, 2000: 66).

² Characteristics of Fordism: “protected national markets; mass production of standardized products/ low qualifications, high wages; bureaucratic hierarchical organizations; standardized mass (male) employment; divisions between managers and workers; low-trust relationships; collective contracting; low level of in-service training for the majority of workers” (Azevedo, 2000: 109).

“In this order of ideas, the economy comes first and only then comes politics, at its service. Firstly, money and the conservation of existing material wealth, then whatever remains. Nothing, most of the time. The ethics of companies or entrepreneurs, the morality of industrialists or owners, the axiomatics of producers or capitalists, the virtues of economists or bankers, this is a litany of oxymorons. (...) It is also necessary to define the economy as a cannibal alchemy (...) which, starting from the time of slaves, builds the money of the masters” (Onfray, 1999: 8).

It was in the 1980s that a review of human capital theory took place, and education and training became a priority, including for companies (scenario 3). However, the human being continues to be a workforce in an unequal and deeply competitive capitalist world. It was no coincidence that, in the space of one year (between 2008 and 2009), VET increased from “31% to 38%” (Cedefop, 2020: 105). Several training and education programmes for young people and adults relaunched VET in public schools, and there was a great effort by Portugal to qualify its population. From the EFA, CEF, CET courses, level 3 and 4 courses (in the case of secondary education) and CTeES (in higher education), our country has demonstrated a deep political concern regarding the qualification of young people who do not find motivation in secondary school and unskilled adults who, for various reasons, did not complete their training and who needed to update and develop their general and/or specific and professional skills.

The new skills now required, in a Europe in which “Henry Ford provided the password to collective amnesia” (Steiner, 2006: 35), are the fruit of the social pact between various national and international bodies recommending the development of the profile of the New Man that, faced with the agony of culture (Ramonet, I., 1999, p. 191), makes us think about Europe (Morin, 1990: 171). This is because “being European means trying to negotiate, morally, intellectually and existentially, the rival ideals, affirmations, *praxis* of the city of Socrates and the city of Isaiah” (Steiner, 2006: 36).

Being European can never be reduced to a set of characteristics required by the economic system. In fact, this is what has always distinguished us from other worlds:

“Simple European cafes and streets are the greatest demonstration of European cultural and intellectual genius. Cities such as Paris, Milan, Florence,

Frankfurt, Weimar, Prague or St Petersburg are living chronicles. Reading the respective toponymics is leafing through a present past. (...) Place Saint-Germain became Place Sartre-Beauvoir. Frankfurt has just named a square Adornoplatz (...). American avenues, sidewalks and streets are simply numbered [...]" (ibid., p.33).

In Europe, vocational education fell under the purview of the school in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was urgent to train technical staff in an environment of development and industrialisation fuelled by the seduction of capitalism. This professional training, in the 19th century, had the mission of increasing "industrial productivity" and was transformed into an educational offer for workers' children. The industry/public school relationship was thus linked to the economy and its development in European states:

"We all know that the generalisation of schools as a public institution occurred due to the imperatives of the Industrial Revolution and as a response to the demands of new social working conditions. (...) It thus became necessary to "store", that is, "box" this non-active segment of the population in order to conform it to the new industrial order" (Sousa, 2004: 166).

This is how, during the 20th century, other types of teaching and training were developed alongside traditional high schools. Technical and professional instruction took place simultaneously with the exercise of the profession, and from there, schools were born, which aimed to develop technical and professional skills within a structure of technological, commercial and industrial development. The big difference, compared to today, is that it is no longer enough to understand this type of learning as a social destination where knowledge and class positions will be certified (Goodson, 1999).

The distinction between technical education (vocational *education*) and professional training (vocational *training*) was fundamental, even if it was achieved slowly, in the political and social representations of VET.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Technical education, in addition to being generally post-compulsory, is aimed at technical professions and its curricular structure is highly specialised, with a pronounced theoretical and scientific training. That is why higher education is one of the possible solutions. But, admittedly, the spirit of professional training is characterised by its practical aspect and its fundamental objective is preparation for professional life. For occupational purposes (scenario 2), VET focused, essentially, and until recently, on the transition from school to the world of work—“(…) vocational education (...) sustains its social validity by developing autonomously and firmly separated from general education” (Azevedo, 2000: 39).

Although both training systems, *vocational education* and *vocational training*, throughout Europe, are professional, they are not confused, because they have behind a curricular structure whose matrix, in one case, is school (scenarios 1 and 2) and, in another, work (scenario 3). In the latter case, in the employment matrix, the contribution of employers is fundamental and makes this learning a terminal training (Azevedo, 2000). The first, vocational education, is guided by continuity of training.

The school model guides professional education and, consequently, has a close relationship with the more general and traditional provisions of academic education. As a formal curricular model, technical and professional education involves study plans, assessment methodologies and certifications that differ from traditional professional training for workers. Professional training is non-formal. This is the aforementioned differentiation between *vocational education* and *vocational training*. But both are characterised by the “intention of immediate integration into the job market” (ibid.).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The three types of education (general, technical and professional) correspond to an implicit social stratification, since in it we find relatively well-defined social functions and social recognition. In a *hierarchy of prestige*, the three types of education are guaranteed, also indirectly, certain social considerations, salaries, types of schools, teachers or trainers and, probably, the most important guarantee in the eyes of those who choose one of these types of learning, social selection. Despite

the various reforms implemented, general secondary schools continued to offer their graduates the best opportunities to pursue university studies. At the same time, the vocational track remained marked by negative selection, and vocational schools were often regarded as educational dead ends.

We are in a position, especially in Portugal, to move towards the full realisation of the pluralistic VET model (scenario 1). We need motivated teachers who are integrated into the responsibility of curricular and pedagogical design. I also think that we have already moved beyond the conception that useful knowledge is seen as common sense because the academic tradition gives preference to the *head over the hands*. There is no neutrality possible here, in this position. The social division of knowledge and the social division of labour are clear. Thus, the curriculum, whether general or vocational, in either scenario, is the site of social struggles that contribute to the unequal distribution of wealth and power. This reflects the persistent structural imbalances that shape contemporary societies. These inequalities are not merely economic but also cultural and symbolic, influencing access to education, employment, and social mobility. The school, its partners and agents, despite their attempts to disguise class domination, accept this social division as something obvious. This is the ideological strength of the curriculum. This is where the curriculum becomes an explicit instrument of power. Students, we insist, are not only certified about their knowledge, but also about their class positions.

Education, often presented as a neutral and emancipatory space, is in fact a field of symbolic and political struggle in which power relations are produced and legitimised. The curriculum, far from being merely a set of contents and pedagogical objectives, is a social construction that reflects the hierarchies and dominant interests within a given society. This text offers a critical reading of the curriculum as an instrument of social reproduction, analysing how school knowledge, technological innovation, and pedagogical relations contribute to the naturalisation of class inequalities.

Some students are evaluated and recognised for their objective knowledge; many others, however, are certified according to their social and cultural position. The educational system functions as a mechanism of symbolic violence, through which the values, linguistic styles, and dispositions of the dominant classes are transformed into universal criteria of merit and competence. In this sense, the curriculum transcends the pedagogical domain and assumes a political function: it legitimises social hierarchy by converting cultural privilege into individual merit.

The symbols and rituals of schooling — from assessment methods to pedagogical language — create an appearance of neutrality that conceals the power relations structuring the educational field. Thus, rather than correcting inequalities, the school tends to reproduce them under the guise of fairness. What is presented as curricular impartiality is, in reality, a codification of the norms and values of the dominant culture.

The social division of labour and the social division of knowledge are two sides of the same power structure. Both reflect and reinforce class hierarchies by determining who has access to certain forms of knowledge and who remains excluded from spaces of symbolic production. The traditional academic curriculum, centred on rationalisation and abstraction, has historically marginalised other forms of knowledge — empirical, manual, affective, and communal — thereby perpetuating an epistemological hierarchy that legitimises only dominant cultural forms. The democratisation of education, therefore, is more apparent than real. The idea that school promotes social mobility is challenged by the persistent unequal distribution of knowledge and recognition.

The curriculum, as a symbolic device, plays a central role in this process, functioning as a privileged instrument for maintaining cultural hegemony. A critical analysis of the curriculum reveals that school knowledge is not neutral: it is a socially constructed form of power. Pedagogical practices, scientific discourses, and educational technologies converge to reinforce the symbolic structures that sustain class inequalities.

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TRI SCENARIJA ZA STRUKOVNO OBRAZOVANJE I OSPOSOBLJAVANJE U EUROPI

SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad analizira implicitne društvene implikacije strukovnih kurikula u stigmatizaciji učenika unutar sustava strukovnog obrazovanja i osposobljavanja (SOO) u Europi. Istražuje se kako simbolička moć društva i obrazovnih aktera oblikuje društvenu percepciju strukovnih obrazovnih putova te pridonosi reprodukciji nejednakosti.

Polazeći od hermeneutičke perspektive, istraživanje tumači predodžbe i diskurse o SOO-u kao društvene konstrukte oblikovane vrijednostima, uvjerenjima i institucionalnim kontekstima. Na temelju analize dokumenata razvijena su tri scenarija primjenom metodološkog okvira planiranja scenarija koji su predložili Snoek i sur. (2004.), strukturirana prema analitičkim osima CEDEFOP-a: demografske promjene i sudjelovanje, tehnološka transformacija rada, uključivost i pravednost te odnos između SOO-a i tržišta rada.

Rezultati pokazuju da strukovno obrazovanje u Europi i dalje odražava šire društvene hijerarhije, djelujući istodobno kao prostor prilika i isključenosti. Razvijeni scenariji upućuju na to kako različiti razvojni smjerovi obrazovnih politika i društvenih procesa mogu ili dodatno učvrstiti ili ublažiti navedene obrasce.

Povezujući interpretativnu analizu i prospektivno promišljanje, rad pridonosi kritičkom razumijevanju SOO-a kao društvenoga i političkoga konstrukta te nudi smjernice za inoviranje obrazovnih politika i promicanje uključivijega europskog obrazovnog prostora.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

strukovno obrazovanje i osposobljavanje, kurikulum, društvena reprodukcija, hermeneutika, planiranje scenarija, CEDEFOP, obrazovne nejednakosti