



The French Vocational *Baccalauréat* Diploma: space of a plural transition for the youth



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Introduction

Until the vocational *baccalauréat* diploma was created, the French hierarchical educational system rested on strong structuring dualisms: on one hand, the opposition between general and technological education, and vocational education; and on the other hand, the opposition between short and long studies. At the secondary level of education, the general *baccalauréat*, considered prestigious, welcomed students who were to focus on higher education. At the opposite extreme, the vocational *Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle* (CAP) and the *Brevet d'Études Professionnelles* (BEP) were considered as the route of relegation and exclusion, reinforcing negative characteristics in students encountering learning difficulties. But since the creation of the vocational *baccalauréat*, this structure has been modified (see appendix). This vocational *baccalauréat* must offer students who failed in general education a path for continuing their studies or catching up through options that are socially more prestigious. As a result, this programme could play an important, if not determining, role in schooling for young people excluded in the battle against academic failure. But do young people excluded from the elite track find in this option, as Alice lost in Wonderland, a chance to create their own pathway? Some 20 years after its creation (1985) we could question whether this diploma has fulfilled its objectives. This paper will not attempt to answer this question but will focus on an additional important aspect: has the vocational *baccalauréat* programme contributed to innovation and opinion changes in French initial secondary education? More precisely, has the social perception of vocational education changed since this *baccalauréat* was created? A Leonardo da Vinci project entitled Analysis and comparison of social rep-

resentations of VET in different European countries (VET-Cultures) suggested that for students, this vocational education programme seems to be a space, time and period for a plural transition: from failure to success, from weak self-esteem to self-confidence, from dependence to autonomy, from childhood to adulthood, from school to work. In this paper, we analyse some of those transitions, occurring mainly during the student period, via case-studies examining the dynamic of social representation of VET.

A victim of the role that the institution itself has forced it to play, vocational education and training in France has always seemed a negative and exclusive model in the eyes of the public at large (Pelpel and Troger, 1993) until, perhaps, the arrival of a new vocational diploma: the French vocational *baccalauréat* diploma. Created in 1985, this new diploma, undertaken in two years after an initial period of vocational training and allowing immediate entry into working life, was not only intended to attest to skills adapted to the new technological demands and changes in work organisation but also to renew interest in VET. Now, 20 years after its creation, it could be questioned whether this diploma has met its original goals. The aim of this paper is more modest, raising the issue of whether the vocational *baccalauréat* programme has contributed to innovation and opinion changes in French initial secondary education. More precisely, has the social representation of vocational education changed since this *baccalauréat* was created?

From different studies (Marquette, Mériot and Kirsch, 1994), the vocational *baccalauréat* seems to be an interesting success. Even though it does not lead to well-established recognition in the occupational field concerned, and while the companies making

The French secondary hierarchical educational system resting upon strong structuring dualisms, has been modified by the creation of the vocational baccalauréat. This aims at offering students who failed in general education a path for continuing their studies or catching up through tracks that are socially more prestigious. Some 20 years after its creation, do students find in this diploma a chance to create their own pathway? Has it changed the social perception of vocational education and training (VET)? From our research, this track seems to be, for students, a space, time and period for a plural transition: from failure to success, from weak self-esteem to self-confidence, from dependence to autonomy, from childhood to adulthood, from school to work. Using case-studies, we analyse the diverse transitions occurring, mainly during the school period, through the dynamic of social representation of VET.



use of this diploma do not exactly coincide with the objectives underlying the creation of the diploma, vocational *baccalauréat* holders are successful in finding employment and remain happy to have undergone such training.

If those students belong to 'the children of the educational democratisation' qualified by Beaud (2002), the focus of this article should be on that last point, complementing a study carried out by the Regional Observatory of Higher Education (ORFS) in 1999 in the Low-Normandy region. Therefore, what does this new diploma do for trainees and how has this diploma contributed to a change in vocational initial education and training social representations?

To answer this question, this paper is organised as follows. The first part gives the framework of French vocational initial education and the original objectives of the French vocational *baccalauréat*. The second part attempts to analyse, using case studies, the plural transition during the school period that constitutes vocational *baccalauréat* training for trainees; the process uses analysis of the dynamic of social representation of VET.

Initial secondary vocational education and the role of the vocational *baccalauréat*

Vocational education institutions in initial secondary training

There are three vocational branches in initial secondary training (see appendix): one which prepares students for a CAP ⁽¹⁾, one which prepares them for a BEP ⁽²⁾ and finally, one preparing them for the vocational *baccalauréat* ⁽³⁾. Those vocational diplomas are mainly ⁽⁴⁾ earned through vocational *lycées* ⁽⁵⁾.

Different branch roles

The branches leading to a CAP or a BEP prepare students over two years for the same level of qualification – that of skilled worker – but are different both in purpose and content. The CAP gives practical skill in particular areas (catering, hairdressing, carpentry), allowing immediate professional integration. The BEP, on the other hand, gives skills in the more demanding technological areas in which professional integration re-

quires higher qualifications (accounting assistant, nurse assistant) and can, therefore, lead to further study for a vocational or technological *baccalauréat*.

Different branch study topics

The specialisations in each branch also vary from one diploma to another. There were more than 200 CAPs preparing students for specific employment in the industrial sector, for example in electricity, plumbing, car maintenance mechanics, in the tertiary sector, such as hairdressing, cooking and sales, and the agricultural sector, such as labouring, gardening or wine growing. There were 39 BEPs preparing students for the same sectors, such as car body work specialist, administrative communication and secretariat, sales and accounts, transport, wines and wine growing, horticulture, growing of fruit trees, etc. The branch leading to a vocational *baccalauréat*, attainable after a CAP or a BEP, offers courses adapted to the needs of the business world, at a level between qualifications for workers and skilled workers, and those for higher technicians. Introduced in 1985, there are some 30 vocational *baccalauréats*, in various specialities. In the industrial sector, for example, there are specialities in electrical equipment and installations, in industrial product definition, and car maintenance. In the tertiary sector, there are subjects such as catering, sales and representation, and artistic careers; in the agricultural sector, there are maintenance and operation of agricultural machines, the timber industry, etc.

Differences between centres for training apprentices (CFA) and vocational *lycées*

A centre for training apprentices is the institution where apprenticeship students learn a trade. Apprenticeship is a type of vocational training allowing young people from 16 to 25 years of age to learn a trade under a private work contract lasting from one to three years. They are under the control of a master and also follow courses in alternation with their practical work.

There are two categories of *lycée*: for general and technological education (LEGT) and focused on vocational studies, the vocational *lycée* (LP). But, in accordance with the framework law of 1989, all technological and vocational diplomas may be studied for under

⁽¹⁾ The certificate of professional aptitude (CAP, *Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*).

⁽²⁾ The technical school certificate (BEP, *Brevet d'études professionnelles*) is a national diploma which becomes a springboard for entering into courses leading to a vocational or technological *baccalauréat*.

⁽³⁾ *Baccalauréat*. A national secondary school leaving diploma organised at an académie (regional) level. The *baccalauréat* is the first stage in university education, since it gives access to higher education. There are three types of *baccalauréat*: the general, the technological and the vocational *baccalauréats*, the last being created in 1985.

⁽⁴⁾ Vocational *baccalauréat* can also be earned through an apprenticeship status in Apprentice Training Centres (CFA). Apprenticeship (apprentissage) is a type of vocational training allowing young people from 16 to 25 years of age to learn a trade under a private work contract lasting from 1 to 3 years in alternation with their practical work, in an institution called an apprenticeship centre (CFA, *centre de formation des apprentis*).

⁽⁵⁾ *Lycées*: State or private secondary schools at higher level. There are two categories of *lycée*: those for general and technological education (LEGT, *lycée d'enseignement général et technique*), and those for vocational studies (LP, *lycée d'enseignement professionnel*).



the apprenticeship system. While initial training in formal schools remains the main purpose of vocational *lycée* courses, the Ministry of National Education wants State schools also to remain open to apprenticeship. Article 57 of the five-year law on employment and vocational training dated 20 December 1993 allows apprenticeship sections or units for training in apprenticeship to be opened in all *lycées*, in close partnership with the business community and with the agreement and assistance of the region. In both these cases, the head teacher is responsible for the content of the courses.

Differences in curriculum and organisation

Whatever the branch, a vocational training programme is based on general education courses ⁽⁶⁾, plus technological courses and practical internship periods in the professional world. Hours vary depending on the specialities chosen by the students in the different branches (Table 1).

Vocational courses vary according to the speciality and the skills required, but they are always organised in the same way:

- technological core subjects for several similar specialities, or within a single professional sector, for instance, all the courses for office jobs such as law, economics, accounting, etc.;
- specialised or practical courses, more particularly linked to future work;
- training periods in industry, introduced in 1992.

Those two tracks (*lycées* and CFA) are also two different ways of training for vocational diplomas. The characteristic of the first track is that courses are mainly carried out in school (*lycée*). Although there is a compulsory period of internship in industry, the proportion of theoretical and practical training in a workshop or laboratory in a *lycée* is much higher. Vocational training through an apprenticeship contract, carried out in CFA, follows exactly the opposite method; most of the training takes place in industry and compulsory education is added. The apprentice is no longer in school but is recruited by the company under a paid work contract.

General and technical courses (hours per week) and practical training in different diplomas

Table 1

| | General courses | Technical courses | Training periods in industry |
|----------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| CAP | From 14h30 to 16h | From 12h to 17h | 12 weeks |
| BEP | From 14h to 22h | From 16h to 20h | 8 weeks |
| Voc.Bac. | From 12h to 14h | From 16h to 18h | From 16 to 20 weeks |

Source: French Ministry of Education

Differences regarding studies in further education

At the end of CAP and BEP training, students can pursue their studies through vocational or technical paths, leading to a *baccalauréat* diploma. But this decision rests mainly with the teaching team and the class council decision as it is particularly important to have full knowledge of each pupil's profile before choosing the type of study. Unlike the vocational *baccalauréat* the technological option prepares students not so much for immediate entry into working life but for further study in higher education, particularly in higher technical studies. Therefore, access to the technological branch is recommended for students who have shown 'considerable motivation and willpower, autonomy and capacity for hard work rendering them capable of succeeding in studies leading to a higher technical or even engineering diploma' during the two years of CAP and BEP general studies. Also, in order to assure every chance of success for students choosing the technological *baccalauréat*, they are first guided towards adaptation first level classes ⁽⁷⁾ (*premières d'adaptation*), in which they undertake general revision, before joining the technological final classes common to all students, of whatever origin. Then, according the candidates' wishes and places available, the committees decide whether to send students to vocational first class or adaptation first class.

Vocational *baccalauréat*: a new level

A new and original place

The history of the vocational *baccalauréat* started in 1983-84 with a discussion in the vocational consultative commission (CPC, commission professionnelle consultative) and a report by the Employers' Union of the Metalworking and Mining Industries (UIMM); the latter made a pressing demand for the quantitative and qualitative development of vocational skills and qualification at the French level IV of education

⁽⁶⁾ General education comprises French, a modern language, history and geography, art, civics, mathematics, physics and social and professional life for all branches. For departments preparing for a CAP and a BEP there are additional classes in mathematics and family and social economics. The purpose of this teaching is to provide basic culture for the modern world with a professional orientation.

⁽⁷⁾ Adaptation first level class (*première d'adaptation*): this class offers students having gained good marks in the last year of BEP the opportunity to continue their study at the technological *baccalauréat* or certificate of technician levels.



through a new diploma 'vocational baccalauréat'. Its request emerged in response to a reduction in school leavers after the technical *baccalauréat* (as those students increasingly pursue their studies in higher education). Since 1984, the union of the deans of vocational *lycées* had faced the same issue. Thus, the Ministry of Education suggested the creation of this new diploma at level IV (see appendix) called vocational *baccalauréat*. This was announced in June 1985 with the law being passed in December.

The purpose was to promote and revalue vocational education in schools now called vocational *lycées* and thereby to allow students in such schools to be recognised as '*bacheliers*', a dignified title before only given to general and technical education schools students. The desire to make education more democratic, was marked by Ministry of Education objectives in the Guidance 1989 Law which stated that the 'Nation wants to lead 80 % of a typical age group to the *baccalauréat* level'. Such an objective implied that technical and vocational education should take part in this national effort: the proportion of CAP and BEP holders wishing to pursue their studies and not enter working life was only 20 %. The revision of vocational education happened also at level V through the creation of technical classes at the fourth and fifth grade. In addition, the BEP was revised, which now prepares up to the vocational *baccalauréat* level.

A pluralistic objective of VET *baccalauréat*

The crisis in youth employment and important structural changes in production and labour organisation implied new training and qualifications. Therefore, the national Ministry of Education wanted, through this guidance law of July 1989, to reform the guidance and tracking system and to highlight two major objectives: to lead 80 % of a typical age group to the *baccalauréat* level and the others to a diploma at level V. It was in this framework that the vocational *baccalauréat* diploma was created. Its creation also allowed the homogenisation and reduction of the number of vocational branches. This diploma appeared to be the minimum requested as a vocational certificate, leading to the invalidation of lower vocational diplomas, such as the CAP and BEP.

Its goals were plural. The first was to respond to the growing demand from businesses for highly qualified production and maintenance workers with qualifications between those of advanced technicians, who hold an advanced technical certificate (BTS) or technological university diploma (DUT), and qualified workers who hold a CAP or BEP. The level of the latter appeared increasingly insufficient to keep up with the development of new technologies in the production of goods and services (computer-assisted design and manufacturing, robotics, office automation, automated production techniques, and computer science for industrial and management applications). A second objective was to respond to the development of new maintenance techniques for personal electronic and computer equipment (such as video recorders, personal computers, and video disks). Moreover, its creation was also to boost vocational education and to enhance cooperation and the relationship between business and schools through the compulsory internship period. The vocational *baccalauréat* were created in close collaboration with employers and take into account specific vocational requirements for direct employment. They differ from technological *baccalauréats* in that they are targeted at specific occupations, whereas the technological *baccalauréats* are broader in scope (electronics, mechanics, etc.).

Vocational *baccalauréat* principles

Vocational *baccalauréat* training lasts two years, and constitutes the final cycle in the vocational route (first and terminal vocational classes). Unlike the technological *baccalauréat*, the vocational *baccalauréat* is primarily a vocational certificate leading directly to an occupation; although its diploma also entitles holders to enter university studies, less than 15 % entered in 1995. The vocational *baccalauréat* provides qualifying training for a particular occupation and admits candidates holding a BEP (or a CAP prepared in two years after the third class) corresponding to the vocational *baccalauréat* concerned. Even though the trend of moving from secondary to tertiary education was less common among technological *baccalauréat* graduates 10 years ago, now, more than one third of students go further. The vocational *baccalauréat* maintains its aim and role of terminal diploma: 15 % of vocational *baccalauréat* graduates nowadays continue their studies.



Purpose of the paper, methodology and data collection

Origins of the research

This paper is part of a European Project called 'Analysis and comparison of social representations of VET in different European countries', covering five European countries. This comparative research aims to shed some light on the differences and commonalities of socially shared meanings and representations in the different countries influencing the newly established path to common European policies for employment and training. Its main aim is to depict how VET is perceived by different social actors (those directly involved as learners in training activities, those belonging to the world of business, and those who perform roles of teachers/trainers), and to explore the evolving paths of mutual understanding and learning among them. This paper presents the learner group data ⁽⁸⁾.

Methodology and data

The data were collected mostly through focus group interviews. Six vocational *lycées* from Low-Normandy were investigated and five groups of people were interviewed (learners, trainers, deans, *baccalauréat* holders, employers, workers). In all, 60 people were interviewed.

Rather than use existing occupational categories it was decided to make a distinction between three broad types of work as follows: learners training for a job primarily with documents, primarily with people and primarily with products or objects.

The investigation used interviews with students trained respectively for accounting and secretarial jobs, for business, commerce and sales, and for maintenance in automated mechanical installation tasks and in climatic engineering. The trainees were between 18 and 22 years old and enrolled in the last year of the two-year vocational *baccalauréat* programme in vocational *lycées*; there were none from centres for training apprentices, CFA. All of them had experienced in-company training periods of 16 weeks introduced into the two-year vocational *baccalauréat* programme.

The data were collected through focus group interviews of six or eight learners in each group, totalling 26 students. The focus-group

interviews lasted about two hours and covered the following topics and issues:

- ☐ VET and the labour market/employment: how did you get involved in your current course? How well will the course you are doing help to prepare you for getting a job when you have finished?
- ☐ VET and education: how do you feel about your current course? How does this course compare with your previous experience of education?
- ☐ VET and social exclusion and inclusion: do you think that people doing your current course are given the respect and social standing they deserve? Do you think that people doing your current course will be given the respect and social standing they should have in the job they are going to do in the future?
- ☐ VET and corporate identity: do you think that your current course will give you the respect and social standing you deserve in the organisation in which you work or are likely to be working in the future?
- ☐ VET and lifelong learning: do you think that what you are learning now provides a solid foundation for things that you might want to learn about in the future?
- ☐ VET and life project: what role does your current course play in your overall educational career? What role does your current course play in your future plans concerning how you want to live your life?
- ☐ VET and preparation for work and for the new economy: do you think your course will prepare you for the new economy and for future changes in the work that you do? Will your course help you to contribute to innovation in your workplace?

Student representation of the vocational *baccalauréat*

Vocational *baccalauréat* training programme: a new meaning?
Vocational *baccalauréat* holders, from a half-tone employment situation ...

At the beginning of the 1985-86 academic year, only 1 300 young people followed their BEP diploma with a vocational *baccalauréat*; nowadays, almost 170 000 students are enrolled in the vocational *baccalauréat* pro-

⁽⁸⁾ For the complete research findings, see Gendron B., *Social representations of Vocational education and training in France through the French vocational Baccalauréat Case Study*, ITB-Arbeitspapiere, Universität Bremen, Bremen: Institut Technik und Bildung Press, 2004b.



Number of specialisations and students in first-year vocational *baccalauréat* (state schools only)

Table 3

| Sector | Subject areas | Male students | Female students | Total students |
|------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Industrial | 31 | 22 915 | 1 779 | 24 694 |
| Services | 16 | 9 679 | 22 959 | 32 638 |
| Total | 47 | 32 594 | 24 738 | 57 332 |

Source: French Ministry of Education, 1994.

gramme. The increase was very rapid during the initial years after the introduction of this new diploma but has since gradually slowed, though it still increases by more than 2 % annually.

However, this overall trend hides significant differences from one training specialisation to another; while the industrial sector combines a smaller number of students with a very large range of training specialisations, the service sector has a great number of students and a limited range of specialities, as can be seen in the 1994 figures for the vocational *baccalauréat* (Table 3).

Studies from the French Centre for Research on Employment and Qualification (*Centre d'études et de Recherche sur l'Emploi et la Qualification*) and the regional observatory of higher education (ORFS, *Observatoire Régional des Formations Supérieures*), on young people coming out of these new training programmes, one at a national level and the other one regional, assess job entry among those who go directly into working life. They show that, despite a favourable situation in the labour market with rapid job entry for those students, (better than that of those with a lower level of occupational qualification such as BEP and CAP), their work activities and job mobility have not measured up to expectations. For instance, two years after the class of 1990 left training, over two-thirds of the men with manufacturing specialisations still held a job as 'skilled worker' and more than 85 % of the women in services remained 'office workers' or clerks in companies. None of those in manufacturing *baccalauréats* was employed as a 'shop technician', the reference job designated at the vocational *baccalauréat* diploma's creation. Even the work of *baccalauréat* holders employed as operational agents in maintenance departments is also far from what had been expected at the origin in the referential employment of the *baccalauréat* diploma.

To a positive image of the Vocational *baccalauréat* training programme

Though demands from companies making use of them do not exactly coincide with the anticipated objectives of the diploma, both the ORFS and this study indicate that students still remain satisfied with their vocational *baccalauréat* training and would repeat their decision. Based on questionnaires addressed to *baccalauréat* holders (1994, 1995 and 1996 year) from Low-Normandy, 2 500 *baccalauréat* holders from 1996 were interviewed (O.R.F.S. 1999) a few months after earning their diploma, about their two-year training programmes and their jobs.

They retained a positive image of their two years spent at the vocational *lycée*, irrespective of the ultimate employment, for several reasons. First, the majority quoted the quality of the education provided, with more than 60 % (both men and women) declaring that this training programme was 'a real chance' in their educational trajectory. Regarding their job, 7 in 10 women said they had been well prepared for their work even though only 4 in 10 had a direct link between their actual job and their training programme. All indicated that their employers appreciated the diploma and that the vocational *baccalauréat* degree was, for most of the men, useful for getting a job. Despite having a different job from that expected, trainees see the vocational *baccalauréat* as a success. This observation raises the question of how that can be explained. Is VET changing in trainee perceptions?

A positive vocational *baccalauréat* representation

Vocational *baccalauréat* holders seem to benefit from a longer period of schooling and to keep in mind the quality of their training programme. So, how does this new degree differ from the other training and vocational training courses? And how do they perceive this new training programme and this new diploma? Some answers can be found from the French hierarchical educational structure and among trainee points of view collected through French monographs from the VET-Culture research described earlier.



Promoting vocational education in a hierarchical educational system

This change of perception seems to deal with institutional, economic, environment and pedagogical aspects of such a training programme, which offers important transition steps for trainees.

Before the vocational *baccalauréat* was created, vocational education accumulated negative perceptions of enrolling all students doing poorly in general education. With the vocational *baccalauréat* came changes, even if too slowly. It offered students who fail in general education a path for continuing their studies, or catching up, in ways that are socially more prestigious. Vocational *baccalauréat* holders seem to benefit from a longer period of schooling.

'We were all special cases, not social cases but ... all of us had some problems ... or had a little something which was not running well ... and all of us had to deal with it by ourselves ...' (female student, document speciality) ⁽⁹⁾

'At the end of the first stage, I was not good and then when I started the BEP programme, my school grades went up, and therefore that way I become more satisfied' (male student, production speciality)

'I didn't choose this track, but at the end of my vocational baccalauréat programme, I told myself, yes, I have finally found something I am completely satisfied with' (male student, production speciality)

'I wanted to do vocational studies, but my mother wanted me to enrol in a general education programme, but after two years spent, I was disgusted with school ... I was discouraged and I wanted to drop out ... but my mum enrolled me in a BEP programme and then, that runs better, and I felt better ...' (Male student, people contact speciality)

In addition, it has contributed to the spread of new forms of knowledge generated by the technological revolution of the late 1960s and the transformation of work tools that this entailed.

As long as validation through the labour market was able to counterbalance the tendencies of the education system, a form of equilibrium was maintained.

Indeed, the system was accused of functioning in a discriminatory manner. But a favourable situation of employment at that time permitted compensation for the inequalities of cultural capital, and manifested a concern for egalitarianism that was deeply rooted in the national culture. With the employment crisis, this fragile equilibrium was broken.

The rupture took two forms:

□ Orientation of education towards sharp competition for the increasingly rare jobs available to young people. This situation increased competition between young people at different levels of training, on the one hand, and between young people and adults already on the labour market, on the other.

'With a BEP diploma, we cannot find a job easily... the baccalauréat diploma is nowadays a minimum ... and parents are aware of the fact that times have changed, we are not living in the context that they experienced themselves' ... 'if you don't have the baccalauréat degree that will be very tough...' (dean of a *lycée*).

Students and their families reacted to this competition by extending the length of studies on the basis of the generally confirmed observation that the higher the diploma level, the greater the chances of entering the labour market. This resulted in a hierarchy of tracks and fields of specialisation that, by accentuating vocational education's mission to encourage the pursuit of studies, tended to 'devotionalise' it.

'Because you have to get your baccalauréat degree, and again my parents told me, at the end of my BEP diploma, they wanted me to return to adaptation first classes' ⁽¹⁰⁾ (male student, people contact speciality)

'My mother wanted me to enrol in a general education programme' (male student, people contact speciality)

□ The growing domination of general education over technical and vocational education. With decreasing opportunities for employment, the assignment of students to vocational education, especially in the first stages of choosing options, was based increasingly on an implicitly remedial model. This led to an increased gap between a normal general education and a less pres-

⁽⁹⁾ The selection of the specialities of VET training programmes has been done according to three categories; rather than using existing occupational categories, it was decided to use a distinction between three broad types of work. Also the categories used by sociologist and in the European VET-Culture group, these categories are, in our case-study: work primarily with people or people contact (commerce and sales, business, waiter), work primarily with products (maintenance in automated mechanical installations, climatic engineering, graphic industry), work primarily with documents (accounting, secretary).

⁽¹⁰⁾ See note 7.



tigious vocational one considered as a means of rescuing students with academic problems.

As a result, the Ministry of national Education decided to undertake reorganisation of the initial vocational training tracks in the vocational *lycées*, promoting modernisation and upgrading the system. The desire to extend studies in the vocational *lycées* was unanimous. A clear statement of the government's intention was to develop technical and vocational instruction and to introduce a *baccalauréat* level training in *lycées*. This new higher vocational degree at the second stage of initial training, the vocational *baccalauréat*, was impelled to adopt the values and evaluation criteria of general training in order to benefit from the identical status.

The mission was to give to the vocational *baccalauréat* both its name and its final form: a two-year training programme after initial vocational training, plus innovative pedagogical tools involving in-company experience. Implementing such a vocational degree at the *baccalauréat* level contributed to a positive innovation and has been appreciated by students and their family as well.

'Because I have to get my baccalauréat degree, and again my parents told me, at the end of my BEP diploma, they wanted me to return to adaptation first classes but I said to them: "no, if I have to continue I am going to enrol in a vocational baccalauréat programme" and they agreed, so I went to the vocational lycée' (male student, people contact speciality)

'I prepared first for a BEP diploma, and then, because I got great marks, I decided to continue with a vocational baccalauréat programme' (female student, people contact speciality)

'I wanted first to attend general education, but I didn't have the level requested, therefore, they told me to attend a vocational track, I didn't have the choice, therefore I prepared for a BEP degree over two years and because I was enjoying that, I went to a vocational baccalauréat programme' (male student, production speciality)

'I was doing well in the BEP programme, so I said to myself "why not continue?" ... families, teachers, all of them incite us to

reach the baccalauréat level' (male student, people contact speciality)

Moreover, priority was given to 'the promotion of the greatest number (i.e. 80 % of a given age at the *baccalauréat* level) but also the promotion of the best' (Solaux, 1990). It reinforced the role of the *baccalauréat* degree as the unique centre of gravity in French initial education, which at the same time reduced the value of lower training levels. This level IV helps to repromote the vocational track by opening the door to further studies in the higher education system. Indeed, the 'vocational *baccalauréat*' constitutes an academic rank like the other *baccalauréats* and can therefore open the way to further studies. To achieve this level and to earn this diploma was a challenge and something very important for them. This was mentioned frequently in the trainee discourses.

'Today, that's 80 % (who will earn their baccalauréat diploma)! And I wanted to be part of them; that's all. We grew up with this idea and that's also my parents who entertain this one' (female student, production speciality)

By its title - *baccalauréat* - the vocational *baccalauréat* created an unprecedented situation in the educational system, which also brought some ambiguities (Leroux, 1998). Through in-company experience, it aims not only at giving qualifications to trainees:

'To earn the baccalauréat, that's also gaining qualification' (male student, production speciality)

It also aims to ensure that holders have a title 'the baccalauréat'; this is still used as a filter and remains the academic reference for getting a job.

'To have been accepted in a vocational baccalauréat programme, this is like going through a net ... step by step, people have been kicked out but ... there are still people remaining, and here we are, still here!' (female student, contact speciality)

'To earn the baccalauréat that's important for more responsibilities. Therefore, we need to pursue studies after the BEP and moreover, in a professional sector. With a BEP degree, we are at the bottom, but the higher you go as with a vocational baccalauréat degree, and eventually with a BTS, the better posi-



tion you get' (male student, production speciality)

'For qualification, a lot of employers seek vocational baccalauréat holders. Just for instance, this year, we got a lot of job offers before the end of our training programme' (dean of a lycée)

Therefore, after a chaotic beginning in the educational system, for some of them, this diploma seems to give them space for transitions allowing them to regain their dignity, self-esteem and confidence.

'I thought that those who were enrolled in a BEP programme were not normal, there was something wrong with them, but the clue was because I was not working at school, and I didn't care for school ... but now, I am ok, everything is going well, fine' (male student, people contact speciality)

'This vocational baccalauréat gives a second chance, to people like me, who didn't reach the level requested in general education to continue our studies' (female student, document speciality)

'In academic lycée, we were too numerous, teachers didn't care, so I came here and I loved it right away, and moreover I got great marks, I felt better' (female student, document speciality)

'I don't want to finish my studies with a vocational baccalauréat, I want to pursue a BTS programme; therefore I will try to find a boss to do it through apprenticeship' (female student, document speciality)

In that new framework, more autonomy and responsibilities have been given to students which helps in recovering self-confidence lost from their failure in general education or at collège level.

Moreover, the vocational *baccalauréat* programme was set up with innovative pedagogical tools and a new logic of training combining fundamental knowledge – justifying the title *baccalauréat* – and in-company vocational experience.

The creation of the *baccalauréat* was supposed to respond to profound changes in work organisation, such as decentralised preparation, decompartmentalisation, and integration of the different functions, in the

case of the processing industries. These changes were supposed to ensure greater autonomy for the operators, allowing them to deal with certain problems encountered in the course of their activity. Therefore, in this aim, more autonomy classes and courses have been developed and given to the students to prepare their classwork on their own or with their classmates. In such a context, students have to learn how to handle their free time and to learn from each other. Also, the qualification of skilled workers has been developed in terms of kind of work and the forms it takes in the different activities more than in terms of greater occupational know-how.

'That's completely different ... teachers are taking us into account ... because before, when we didn't succeed or understand, we were put at the end of the classroom; here, instead of that, they explain until we understand' (female student, document speciality)

'We are more free but always well advised' (female student, people contact speciality)

'Even teachers look at us differently, and differently from BEP students ... we are no longer BEP students where they were asking us to underline in red colour such a sentence or another. In the baccalauréat programme, they ask us to know how to take notes, and to be autonomous in our work. If we have a deadline for homework, we have to deal with it on our own; if you encounter some difficulties or if you need help, teachers are always around ... and at the beginning of the school year, they explain what they expect from you ... That's our lookout! One has to extricate oneself' (female student, people contact speciality)

'We are no longer in BEP classes, ... we have documents, tables ... that we have to discuss and to analyse together, we have to know how to take notes ... that's more relaxed, ... even teachers are more relaxed ... In a BEP classroom, teachers are teaching behind their desk and give their course, and then when that's over, they are gone ... here, they can be sitting on their desk, they 'live' their courses ... that's linked to the selection at the entrance ... because the students who chose to continue in a vocational baccalauréat programme are motivated, more than they were in BEP because they were enrolled in such training without their agreement, whether



you follow or not ... who cares? (female student, people contact speciality)

The relationships between teachers and students in such a programme seem to be unique or special for several reasons: the number of students per course, the student ages, and the selection process. These different factors may allow new teaching experiences and entail new behaviours. Teachers are more available and experience new ways to teach in their classrooms.

'Because of small classes (classes are separated into two parts), if there is someone who has a problem, he can take him aside to take more time to explain to him' (female student, document speciality)

'We stop if someone doesn't understand, the teacher will explain to him and during that time, we will focus on something else or we will listen' (female student, document speciality)

'We know that we are not alone, they are supportive ... If I have some trouble in preparing my homework, I'll try to find out for a while and then, if I am still stuck, I will ask them tomorrow, and thus I hope to understand. Whatever, I think they are always available' (female student, document speciality)

'If there is something wrong, they will get it right away, and would like to discuss it ... they take an interest in us' (female student, people contact speciality)

'The selection at the entrance has an impact on teacher behaviour (because they have in front of them students who wish and want to belong to the vocational baccalauréat programme, they (students) want to succeed, they have decided to be prepared for a job, and to learn and to do their maximum ... and when we forget that, teachers don't forget gently to remind us that 'you have chosen to be here and if you are not satisfied you can go out ...' we can be angry with that but we cannot blame them ... that's the reality and we have to deal with ...' (female student, document speciality)

This autonomy seems to be well appreciated among students; it is considered as a proof of mutual confidence between faculty and students, and becomes part of the training and professional knowledge some of them need to acquire. The fact that they

are no longer considered as anonymous but as a complete person or an adult helps them regain their self-confidence. Self-esteem can also be developed through mutual help, and by learning in a group.

'That belongs to the professional knowledge, we have a lot of hours in "autonomy classes", we also have a lot of personal work, and teachers expect from us something different (from the BEP level) ... that creates some links between the pedagogical team and the faculty ... if we want to have a break of 10 minutes to talk with the teacher, we do, or if we meet the teacher at the cafeteria, we say hello and we discuss with him or her naturally ... we are no longer anonymous, there's no longer the barrier students/teachers, it's face to face or adult person in front of an adult person respecting each other' (female student, document speciality)

'Autonomy in our work ... that's very enjoyable ... they give us work to manage with, a deadline, and then tell us "you will have to sort it out yourself, you have at your disposal a computer room, you can use whatever material you want, do whatever you want until the work has to be done on time" and that's for me what I call autonomy' (female student, document speciality)

'During the autonomy hours, we can use computers, work with our files which are stored all year if we want in a cabinet and there are always teachers around if we need help for instance in computer science, or we can work with our classmate and we can help each other to manage our work ... that's interesting and a great atmosphere, we, students in the vocational/baccalauréat programme, are close to each other and we help each other better than the others' when someone has a problem, we talk together, and we try to solve it' (female student, document speciality)

'The vocational/baccalauréat allows more autonomy, self-management, we learn to sort out ourselves, I find that more gratifying ...'

'Teachers put together students who got great marks with ones who had some difficulties to prepare exercises together which allow the former to explain to someone else what he understood' (female student, people contact speciality)

Beyond that, this trend of pedagogical innovation was encouraged by faculty changes,



with fewer and fewer people who have worked in production and more coming from training. More important is the introduction of in-company training periods: an average of 16 weeks distributed over the two-year programme. This internship and school-based alternation training plays an important role for such students. It contributes to their personality building and professional identity formation. That seems to be also an opportunity for them to find out what would and could be their role in the company and also in society: they feel useful.

'Moreover, we have 16 weeks of internships that allow us to acquire some vocational experience' (female student, document speciality)

'We arrive motivated when we have an internship, what we learn at school can be applied during our internships, therefore, that is the reason why we have to learn' (male student, production speciality)

'We are convinced that we can work; that's already stimulating'

'What we learn at school, we try applying and using this knowledge in the company, so that's great, and they give us some responsibilities ... we practice, therefore I am satisfied ... employers gave us some responsibilities, ... we are not only internship students for them ... they consider us as employees' (male student, production speciality)

'We've already had six weeks of internships, so we had time to learn and to be trained at the end of the in-company period, so my boss told me 'I am going on vacation, could you replace me'; at least, I felt of value, that's very pleasant because that means that she gives me all her responsibility' and if something happens, we will assume it, but nevertheless, she trusts me. That's different from the BEP internships where we were still considered as kids ... In the vocational baccalauréat in-company period, we feel more adult, and we have some experience through some previous internships. We know what we are talking about, and that's also true that sometime we can bring them some knowledge.' (female student, document speciality)

'In our internship in BEP, we didn't have any responsibilities, but at the baccalauréat level they treat us as adult and responsible persons

... they give us very important tasks, they trust us' (male student, production speciality)

'In such a training, we feel integrated wherever and whatever the company ... we are trained at integrating ourselves easily whatever the place, the topic and to be immediately operational'

'To introduce ourselves ... like to sell ourselves ... even for looking for an internship ... the mail, phone calls ... I will say the first month of looking for an internship, we have already to overcome barriers but then, we take our bags and go to prospect for an internship company which will welcome us ... that also helps a lot for our future ...' (female student, production speciality)

'At the beginning, we arrive with our scholarly benchmarks, I will say, like to smile on the phone, to type ... that's our ability to adapt ... and then, with the customer contact and our colleagues, we react differently, we learn from the organisation, from the company we are working with ... we forget the scholarly things, that's become a reflex ... natural, and very spontaneous ... and we bring our own touch, and learn more' (female student, contact speciality)

A new and confusing situation

The period of transition from school to working life is tending to become longer and more complicated. Young people with low levels of schooling and from low vocational level tracks are particularly affected by changes which keep bringing *'an awareness of the infernal character of the spiral that was thus set off, tied to recognition of a crisis in occupational socialisation'* (Kirsch, 1994). This problem highlights two dimensions of youth socialisation: the transition from school to work, and the building of occupational identity.

The occupational transition constitutes the path between school and working life. It represents the period when prior social codes, corresponding to those of school life, have been lost but those of their future work collective have not yet been acquired. During the previous economic period, this transition was treated by the solidarity of immediate support networks, companies and/or vocational guidance counsellors. Family marriage, neighbourhood and social network were channels for finding a job. With the unem-



ployment crisis, this natural regulating process was no longer guaranteed. The trend towards recruiting young vocational *baccalauréat* graduates for jobs traditionally held by CAP or BEP holders may lead to a downgrading of the new diploma. This risk is accentuated still further by the fact that the number of those former diploma holders is declining because of the increasing number of people obtaining the diploma (and its impact described by Beaud, 2002) and the race for longer studies. Therefore, the success or failure of the vocational *baccalauréats* is just as much at stake within the company, through work organisation and recruitment choices in a youth unemployment crisis. Demographic trends, and their economic and labour market impacts, are expected to slow down; it will be interesting to observe the company recruitment attitudes.

The building of occupational identity among youth raises the same kind of questions for Kirsch (1994). During full employment, the process occurs naturally on the basis of models provided by the family environment and surroundings, and the young people's different socialisation groups, and by the intermingling of generations that takes place within the company. In the economic crisis framework, this natural process stopped as companies ceased their role of smoothing youth entry into working life, by selecting operational, experienced and skilled workers. Moreover, in this diploma massification and increasing job-competition, employers become more demanding, resulting in a hierarchy of tracks and fields specialisation that, by encouraging further studies, tends to 'devotionalise' it. In this context, vocational *baccalauréat* students are still split between negative and positive opinions of VET.

'That's well known, it's a dead end, if you cannot attend general education, therefore you will be enrolled in the vocational track' (male student, production speciality)

'The (vocational baccalauréat) programme brings good things but it's a pity that people look at it as different from the general education track. General education is an open route for people who don't know what they want to do. In contrast, the vocational track, that's for people who know exactly where they want to go, we have already some information about our professional future life' (female, production speciality)

'I went backward selecting the vocational track ... That's clear, people believe that the vocational education level is below general education; that's the position and before getting involved in vocational education I shared this opinion, but now that I am enrolled in such a programme, I agree that the level is lower but the vocational knowledge is another matter, another field, and that's as interesting and fruitful as the general one' (female, production speciality)

'I enrolled in the vocational track with some trepidation because it has a 'bad' reputation ... that's adult people who talk about it that way ... not especially my family or my friends, but when I was at the lycée in general education, we were talking about the different baccalauréats, it always came out that "vocational", the BEP or CAP programmes were trash, were composed of "crazy people" ... They were for sure far below us regarding the level of education ... and we got the same opinion for vocational/baccalauréat, and worse from teachers who think the same way and talk about it the same way; I met several people from different backgrounds who promote this false perception. Because now I am in this track, I changed completely my opinion, young people from my generation got a wrong image of it from adults or teachers' (male student, production speciality)

If the vocational *baccalauréat* holders seem to benefit from a longer period of schooling and even if their work activities and job mobilities have not measured up to expectations, their way of seeing VET and their VET point of view and representation are changing; those changes have to function within organisational and social contexts, leading nonetheless to a confusing situation which could also depend on the student goal: earning a diploma, access to a qualification recognised by employers or labour market entry. If vocational training is still in search of identity, the VET *baccalauréat* two-year programme was, for the trainees, a time for plural transitions.

Conclusion

Before the vocational *baccalauréat*, the French undergraduate educational system rested upon structuring dualisms. Especially at secondary level, the vocational track was considered as the track of 'relegation and exclusion' (for students who failed in academic courses). But since the creation of



the vocational *baccalauréat*, this structure has been modified and thus, contributed to a main innovation in French initial secondary education. This programme offers students who have failed in general education a path for remedial education, continuing their studies or catching up studies toward more socially prestigious courses. As a result, this vocational education programme plays an important, if not determining, role in developing schooling for young people excluded from, and in the fight against, academic failure. In this framework, those vocational *baccalauréat* holders seem to benefit from the plural characteristics of this programme (longer period of schooling, maturation, new pedagogical methods, i.e. another way to learn and to be taught). If some young workers interviewed stated that they have not obtained the job expected, as emphasised in Beaud research (2002), they all stressed that if they had to choose again among secondary education tracks, they opt for VET. This programme appeared to be,

for those young people excluded from the élite track, a real chance to build a way forward, as Alice in Wonderland, regaining through this vocational programme their self-esteem, confidence and desire in education. Such results are already significant in an individual and personal development perspective: they are focused on emotional competences which remain too often ignored in traditional education, even if they are crucial for work and above all to allow human capital growth (Gendron, 2004a). Is not the prime aim of education and training development of the whole person? Have we forgotten what Aristotle says when he maintains that education must allow man to fulfil himself and find out what he truly is? The vocational *baccalauréat* programme appears to be a space, time and period for a plural transition: from failure to success, from weak self-esteem to self-confidence, from dependence to autonomy, from childhood to adulthood, and from school to work.

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Key words

Vocational training, training evaluation, learning, pedagogy, individual development, sciences of education.



**A simplified diagram of the French secondary and tertiary educational system
(and the apprenticeship system)**

Figure 1

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------|-----------------|--------------|---|---|--|--|--|
| | | | Main general curricula <i>(in regular education: student status)</i> | | | Curriculum in CFA <i>(apprentice training centres: apprentices status)</i> | |
| Higher education | Age 18 and over | | Level II-I | Doctorate | <i>(below new architecture in the Bologna process)</i> Doctorate | Engineering diploma | |
| | | | | Advanced Degree <i>(DEA - Diplôme d'études approfondies)</i> <i>(DESS - Diplômes d'études supérieures spécialisées)</i> <i>(Diplôme d'ingénieur)</i> | Master Degree <i>(previous Maîtrise + DEA or DESS)</i> | | |
| | | | | Master <i>(Maîtrise)</i> | | | |
| | | | | BA Degree <i>(Licence)</i> | BA Degree <i>(Licence)</i> | | |
| | | | Level III | Undergraduate diploma and Higher-grade technical diplomas <i>(DEUG -Diplôme d'études universitaires générales)</i> <i>(DUT- Diplôme universitaire de technologie),</i> <i>(BTS- Brevet de technicien supérieur)</i> | | DUT, BTS | |
| Lycée | Aged 15 to 18 | 3 to 4 years | Level IV | General school leaving certificate <i>(baccalauréat general)</i> | Technical school leaving certificate <i>(baccalauréat technique)</i> | Vocational school leaving certificate <i>(baccalauréat professionnel)</i> | <i>Vocational school leaving certificate (baccalauréat professionnel)</i> |
| | | | Level V | General course | Technical course | BEP CAP (lower grade vocational certificates) Vocational course | <i>BEP CAP (lower grade vocational certificates) Vocational course</i> |