

Article

Best Practices in the Development of Transversal Competences among Youths in Vulnerable Situations

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Abstract: (1) Background: The aim of Second Chance Schools (E2Cs) is to provide employment-focused training for young people who left compulsory education without any formal qualifications by encouraging them to pursue initial vocational training. Transversal Competences (TCs) are important for enabling the social inclusion of young people in vulnerable situations by promoting their entry into the labour market. However, TCs are not always systematically developed. The objective of this study is to analyse good practices in inculcating these skills in this group of young people. (2) Methods: In-depth case studies were conducted in six best-practice schools. The following methods were used in the studies: questionnaires to school; a checklist to analyse the teaching materials used; an interview with the people responsible for the programme; an interview with students; and a questionnaire to representatives from the business sector. (3) Results: The six E2Cs attached great importance to TCs, which were taught specifically through a student-centred, active, varied and collaborative methodology that was periodically reviewed and adapted to students' needs. TCs were evaluated before, during, and after the process was completed. (4) Conclusions: The results identified specific key elements for promoting the development of TCs that could be transferred to other schools and, consequently, could have implications for education policies in this field.

Keywords: transversal competences; employability; risk of exclusion; youth; Second Chance Schools; social inclusion; case study; best practices; vocational education

1. Introduction

The economic crisis that started in 2007 has led to a significant loss of employment in Spain, especially among young people. The unemployment rate for the labour force aged below 25 is 32.99% [1], and those with the lowest educational level have been the most severely affected [2].

It is clear that young people's educational level is an important factor in employability. However, in Spain, where the at-risk-of-poverty-rate is 21.5% [3], about 25% of the 15-year-old population leave Compulsory Secondary Education without any formal qualifications [4]. The school dropout rate stands at 17.9% [4], well above that of the EU 28, which is 10.6% [5].

These data confirm that there is a considerable percentage of young people who do not complete the mandatory minimum education level, or do not pursue specialist qualifications. This puts them at risk of exclusion, due to the difficulties of entering and staying in the labour market. The Basic Vocational Education and Training (hereinafter BVET) (known in Spanish as Formación Profesional Básica) was specifically conceived to include students who had been unable to successfully complete their compulsory education (See Figure 1).

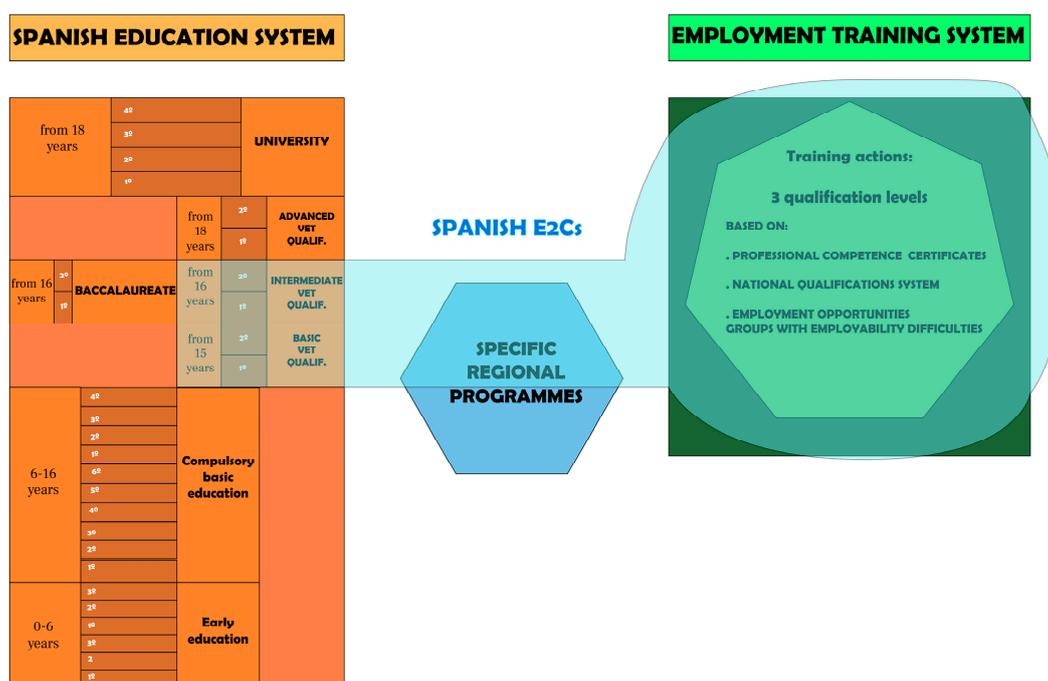


Figure 1. E2Cs (Second Chance Schools) in the Spanish Education and VET (Vocational Education and Training) ecosystem.

The Spanish BVET system leads to a basic technician qualification (Basic VET qualification in Figure 1) in approximately 20 professional fields. It also provides access to intermediate VET (Intermediate VET qualification in Figure 1) and to the examination for the Lower Secondary Education Certificate (Compulsory Basic Education in Figure 1) [6].

A significant number of educational initiatives emerged in Spain in the early 1980s which were aimed at improving the social integration of young people who were outside of the formal education system without any qualifications.

In the second half of the 1990s, a pilot project called ‘Second Chance Schools’ (E2Cs) was promoted by the European Commission with the same objective. It was implemented between 1996 and 2000 in several member states following the publication of the White Paper on Education and Training [7]. A model with four common characteristics was tested in 13 European schools:

- A partnership of local authorities, social services and associations, and the private sector; the latter to provide training places and employment opportunities for pupils.
- Teaching focused on the needs, wishes and abilities of individual pupils, and on stimulating active learning.
- Flexible teaching modules that combined the development of basic skills (literacy, numeracy and social skills, among others) with practical training in and by companies.
- A central role for the acquisition of skills in and through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) [8].

Most schools ceased their activities after the completion of the pilot project, but the term Second Chance Schools has been maintained in European Union policies to refer to this type of initiative.

In 2015, a series of important Spanish organisations partnered together to improve education for young people, and created the Spanish Association of Second Chance Schools (known as the AE2O). The AE2O offers 39 accredited units to some 7994 young people, served by about 740 professionals [9].

Applicants to these schools must meet the following minimum requirements [10]:

- Be aged between 15 and 30 years old.

- Have no formal recognition of skills required at the end of Compulsory Secondary Education.
- Have no professional qualifications to facilitate social stability and integration.

These E2Cs offer a wide range of training courses. Some schools provide both formal education (Basic VET and Intermediate VET) and non-formal training programmes, job training and lifelong learning (blue shading in Figure 1), although not all schools have the full range of pathways available. This is because the young people served by these schools are preparing for the labour market, so vocational and technical training is often identified as a priority with a view to promoting job stability [11]. Most initiatives combine professional training with other more general types of education, establishing an employability-based educational framework that relies on the development of basic and transversal competences [12].

As stated in its Charter of Fundamental Principles [13], the training of young people in E2Cs in Spain aims to develop a series of competences to facilitate their entry into the labour market and foster social integration. The concept of competences makes it possible to link educational objectives to behavioural objectives [14] by ensuring knowledge is applied to specific contexts, and moving away from education as an abstract concept.

The term ‘competence’ is used in two important inter-related areas: the world of work and job performance, and the development of society in general and the functioning of citizens. The first area has had a greater influence on the curriculum design of VET, both in formal and non-formal pathways. The second area has had more of an impact on general compulsory and post-compulsory education [2].

Transversal competences (TCs) are necessary for the successful integration of young people into society, in general, and into socio-professional settings, in particular. They are life skills related to attitudes and behaviours that are essential for carrying out tasks in social and work environments (teamwork, responsibility and initiative, among others). They complement other types of basic and technical-professional skills and are also required for meeting the objectives set in the training programmes. TCs are linked to how people are and how they act. Knowledge can cause changes in both attitudes and behaviours [15].

The European Commission defines competence as “... a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context” [16] (p. 3), and transversal competences are those necessary for personal development and fulfilment. These are essential for active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. They are transferable to multiple work, personal and social settings that enable participation in different areas of life, such as the economic, political, family and educational domains [12].

These competences have been studied from different perspectives in research and education, including the psychological, pedagogical, social and occupational [12,17–22]. The varied approaches have resulted in different terminology and nuances in how they are defined, depending on the standpoint and purpose [23]. The use of the term ‘transversal competences’ encompasses a series of constructs including values, social skills, socio-professional skills, attitudinal skills and soft skills, among others. Their use in E2Cs is based on the approach adopted to organise their training and evaluation.

This study uses the term transversal competences, as it is more widely implemented in formal education. It is the term employed in the Spanish General Education System Act (LOGSE) [24]. Transversal competences are also discussed at length, and are found in the regulations and the literature linked to the educational reform that are focused on personal development aspects (values, behaviours and attitudes) that are not specifically taught in any of the disciplines found in formal education [25]. The breadth of the concept makes it essential to what an individual is like and how they behave, and is therefore a key element in individual, social and professional development. Transversal competences are an inescapable part of the educational and training process of young people and are a major factor in the success of Second Chance Schools.

Some studies have focused on analysing the level that Vocational Training students have achieved in specific competences. Sánchez-Bolivar, Martínez-Martínez and Parra-González [26], for example,

assessed the level of social skills, while Kazilan, Hamzab and Bakar [27] examined the level of employability skills among the technical and vocational education students in Malaysia. In this vein, Olmos Rueda [28] analysed the level of mastery achieved in basic competences, as perceived by Basic Vocational Training students, their teachers, and their employers. However, despite the importance of the effectiveness of teaching-learning proposals and the evaluation of TCs, these have not been sufficiently studied. Eizagirre, Altuna and Fernández [23] carried out a study on good practices in the development of TCs in formal Vocational Training in a Spanish region and highlighted the key role played by collaborative and active environments.

Salva-Mut, Nadal-Cavaller and Melià-Barceló [29] identified some successful elements in E2Cs without specifically focusing on TCs. Favourable factors included using a comprehensive, individualised approach, teaching professional content and habits for life and personal development, instrumental learning, autonomous learning, and developing affective bonds with teachers.

Due to the heterogeneity of E2Cs in terms of origin, geographical location and training programmes, it is important to carry out an in-depth analysis of successful actions focused on the development of TCs which are coherent, consistent and effective, and may also serve as a reference for other schools. Consequently, the objective of the study was to answer the following research question: What aspects characterise best practices in the teaching and assessment of TCs of young people in vulnerable situations?

2. Materials and Methods

A case study design was used to answer the research question. Case study design is defined by interest in individual cases rather than the methods of inquiry used [30]—the case being an object to be studied for an identified reason. The suitability of this methodological design and approach in research with similar institutions and population has been demonstrated in previous studies. Villardón-Gallego et al. carried out a case study to evaluate a programme to develop employment skills in an E2C [22].

In line with standard ethical requirements, both the schools and the participants were informed of the objectives and research methodology. They were also advised of the voluntary nature of their participation and their option of withdrawing from the study at any time. Confidentiality was ensured throughout data collection and processing.

The study was conducted in three phases: screening or selection of cases, analysis of best practices or cases, and verification. The procedure and methodology employed are described below for each phase. In phases 1 and 2, a seven-member committee (two females and five males) that consisted of two social and educational research experts, three experts in social intervention, and two training experts who verified the instruments, procedure and data analysis. The members of the expert committee were proposed by the AE2O based on their academic and professional expertise for research quality assurance purposes.

In accordance with critical communicative methodology [31], a dialogue between researchers and study cases was promoted. The results obtained were discussed and verified with the participating schools (phase 3).

2.1. Phase 1. Selection of Cases

In order to be accredited as an E2C, schools are required to undergo an accreditation process. Accreditation criteria are established and applied by agents external to the AE2O [9].

To select the accredited E2Cs with best practices in TC training for the case study (10% of the total), an online open-ended questionnaire (Q1) was designed to cover three areas: TC organisation (selection and classification), teaching-learning plan (strategies and resources), and assessment (tools and participants).

Once the committee of experts verified the research instrument, Q1 was emailed to the 39 accredited E2Cs, to be answered by the person responsible for each E2C, or whoever was in-charge

of the development and assessment of the TC programme. Some 35 out of the 39 E2Cs returned the completed questionnaire. The remaining four did not have a specific plan for developing TCs.

The selection criteria for best-practice schools were: (a) having a specific work plan aimed at developing TCs; (b) having a list of TCs of which the educators were aware; and (c) having a TC assessment system. The TC training indicator score achieved in their accreditation process was also taken into account [9].

Firstly, the four researchers independently checked four completed Q1s before reaching a consensus on their compliance with the criteria. Secondly, one of the researchers analysed the remaining Q1s and removed those schools that did not meet the requirements. The E2Cs that fulfilled the three selection criteria and had Excellent or Very Good score on the indicator related to TC training in the accreditation process were shortlisted. A total of eight E2Cs met the selection criteria. Finally, six E2Cs were chosen for the case study based on geographical diversity as an additional aspect.

2.2. Phase 2. Analysis of Best Practices

A collective instrumental case study was conducted of the six E2Cs selected as good practice-schools based on the quality criteria mentioned above. The case study design suited the purpose of the research, as it provided an in-depth understanding [32] of the way these E2Cs taught and assessed TCs.

The methodological approach was mainly qualitative and used several methods to collect information, as qualitative research is, of essence, “inherently multimethod” (Denzin and Lincoln, p. 5) [33].

The following instruments were used: a questionnaire for the E2Cs; a checklist for reviewing their teaching materials; interviews with programme managers; interviews with students; and a questionnaire for the representatives of the business sector that collaborated with the E2Cs. By using different tools and engaging various agents, comprehensive information was obtained about the TC training programmes. Data from different sources was triangulated and verified.

2.2.1. Questionnaire (Q2)

A questionnaire (Q2) mainly consisting of open-ended questions was designed. It included the following sections: (a) Identification of each E2C; (b) Organisation of transversal competences (list and classification of TCs, procedure on the choice of TCs according to the characteristics of student groups); (c) Teaching-learning approach (theoretical basis, didactic strategies, resources, adaptation to students' needs, and teacher training); and (d) Assessment (procedure, tools, and participants).

Q2 was developed ad hoc by the researchers. It was reviewed by the expert committee and then sent online to be completed by the person responsible for the TC programme at each E2C selected.

The following steps were taken to analyse the responses: First, two researchers, independently, summarised the most important information from each section, which was to be later verified by the other two researchers. The data from each section were completed with some information obtained through other techniques (teaching material analysis and interviews).

2.2.2. Analysis of Teaching Materials

In addition to answering Q2, the respondents were asked to send documentation related to the programme, including didactic resources, evaluation system and tools, and details of teacher training. A checklist was devised that contained different quality criteria for analysing the teaching programme and resources used by each E2C. Before applying the checklist, the criteria were reviewed by the expert committee. The items reviewed are specified in Appendix A.

To agree on the criteria to be applied to the checklist, the researchers first analysed one case together. Each case was subsequently analysed by two researchers independently, and later they compared results, discussed discrepancies, and reached an agreement. When the researchers had difficulty reaching a consensus, the expert committee was consulted.

2.2.3. Interview with Programme Managers

An adaptation of the semi-structured interview for managers used by Villardón-Gallego et al. (2017) was used [22]. The interview script included open-ended questions relating to the following areas: (a) importance given to competence-based learning; (b) procedure for informing teaching staff; (c) procedure for starting TC training with students; (d) procedure for choosing and organising teaching materials; (e) procedure for monitoring the training process; (f) teachers' attitudes and teacher training; (g) students' attitudes; (h) students' assessment; (i) evaluation of the training programme.

The interview script was reviewed and approved by the expert committee. In five of the six E2Cs, the interviews were carried out in-person and lasted approximately one hour. The interview with the last E2C was carried out via Skype due to scheduling issues. Every interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

In line with the communicative methodological approach, the information from the interview served to verify and complete the information collected from the questionnaire and the analysis of teaching materials.

2.2.4. Student Interview

Three students from each E2C participated in a face-to-face semi-structured group interview lasting approximately one hour each. In one Second Chance School, the interview was carried out via Skype due to scheduling issues. The interview script was an adaptation of the one used by Villardón-Gallego et al. (2017) [22] and covered the following areas: (a) importance given to transversal competences; (b) TC training strategies and assessment; and (c) overall satisfaction with the TC programme.

The interview script was reviewed and approved by the expert committee before use. In line with the communicative methodological approach [34], the analysis of the information obtained from the student interviews was used to complete and contrast the information obtained by questionnaire and document analysis.

2.2.5. Questionnaire for Representatives from the Business Sector (Q3)

In order to include employers' views, a questionnaire (Q3) containing both open-ended and closed questions was designed by the researchers and subsequently reviewed by the expert committee. The instrument included the following sections: (a) company identification; (b) importance of TCs in the work environment; and (c) evaluation of the collaboration between the company and the E2C. The questionnaire was sent to the companies that collaborated with the six E2Cs hosting students for practical training. A total of 71 companies participated.

The quantitative information obtained was analysed by calculating the descriptive statistics for central tendency and dispersion. The open-ended questions were examined by establishing several categories following an inductive method. The researchers jointly agreed on these categories by reading the responses of ten percent (10%) of the Q3s received. Once the categories were established, two researchers coded the responses independently. The coding structure was then compared and discussed to establish a consensus.

2.3. Phase 3. Verification of Results with the Second Chance Schools

A preliminary version of the results report was sent by email to each of the six E2Cs in order to check the suitability and accuracy of the information collected.

Additionally, the preliminary results were discussed with the participants in a group session in order to foster an egalitarian dialogue among researchers and the E2Cs [34].

3. Results

The results of both phase 1 and phase 2 are presented below.

3.1. Phase 1. Selection of Second Chance Schools

Six E2Cs were selected from the 39 accredited E2Cs for the case studies to explore their best practices in TC training. All of them fulfil the three criteria for inclusion (a specific plan to develop TCs; a list of TCs known by educators; and a TC assessment system). 4 E2Cs scored Excellent and 2 rated Very Good on the indicator related to TC training in the accreditation process (see Table 1)

Table 1. Second Chance Schools (E2Cs) selected.

Second Chance School	Region	TC Training Accreditation Score	Number of Students 2018–2019 (%)	Number of Teachers 2018–2019 (%)
E2C N1	Basque Country	Excellent	760 (9.5)	66 (8.9)
E2C N2	Basque Country	Very Good	258 (3.6)	25 (3.4)
E2C N3	Madrid	Excellent	1441 (18)	59 (7.9)
E2C N4	Andalusia	Very Good	51 (0.6)	8 (1.1)
E2C N5	Catalonia	Excellent	437 (3.5)	55 (7.4)
E2C N6	Aragon	Excellent	121 (1.5)	18 (2.4)

Table 1 includes the number of students served by each selected E2C and the percentage of total students served by the 39 accredited E2Cs. The number of teachers in each school and the percentage of total teachers in all the E2Cs are also provided.

The accredited E2Cs are located in 8 of the 17 Spanish Autonomous Communities or regions. The six selected E2Cs are situated in five of these Communities.

3.2. Phase 2. Best Practices in Transversal Competences

The common characteristics identified in the in-depth analysis of the TC training programmes in the selected E2Cs are presented below.

3.2.1. Transversal Competences

Both the programme managers and the students in the six E2Cs considered that TC training was very important for youths in vulnerable situations, as TCs are vital for them to enter and remain in the labour market, and to correctly function in society. The programme manager in E2C N6 explained:

“[...] we work with a population who has undergone a cultural change or who may lack role models or adult figures. This leads to an inability to tolerate frustration, they do not know how to behave [...]. TCs are the general culture for them to know how to be, how to behave, in other words; it is [about] learning how to be a person and it is more important than purely academic content”. (OzR2)

In the words of a student from E2C N6 and another one from E2C N3:

“To have a job in a company, it is essential to be someone they can trust, to be able to handle responsibility; if you are not like that, I don’t think anyone will want to employ you.” (OzE1)

“There was a strong focus on your personal competences, so that in the future you will not only have technical knowledge, but you also know how to behave [...]. There isn’t much point in being highly qualified if you do not know how to behave, if you are late for work, if you don’t get on with your colleagues, or you can’t adapt to the group.” (TE2)

The TCs chosen to be worked on by students were different in each E2C, although some were common across all the schools, such as self-knowledge and self-confidence, teamwork and interpersonal relationships, a sense of responsibility, emotional and conflict management, and tolerance.

The input from the business sector, the exit profile, and the characteristics of the group and of each student were taken into account in order to decide which TCs were to be the focus for each of the groups and students. In this way, the training was tailored to individual needs.

3.2.2. Teaching

The six E2Cs developed active, varied and collaborative strategies for teaching TCs. Educators planned activities that were carried out in groups to encourage interpersonal relationships between classmates. Thus, teamwork and other social skills such as empathy and conflict management were promoted. In the words of two E2C N3 students:

“Outings where we played games to ensure that we all felt close to each other and knew how to work as a team [...]. They did various activities so that we could all relate to each other.” (TE3)

“We played, did group dynamics, and games, and when we finished, we sat down and talked about what we had been working on.” (TE1)

The learning activities were student-centred and combined activities with individual and group reflection to encourage students to become aware of how important TCs are. Activities were interactive and either started or finished with a reflection task.

A feature that was common to these E2Cs was that they all had tailored education programmes, both in terms of establishing objectives and in monitoring achievements. The teachers were genuinely concerned about every student, not only in terms of the academic aspects involved, but also of their life circumstances. The students felt supported and valued (E2C N2):

“If they see that you are not OK, they ask you directly to try and find a solution; here they focus more on that aspect, more on the personal side of things.” (ORE2)

The six E2Cs had digital materials available for teachers to provide training in TCs. The materials were flexible and could be adapted to each group and sector. They were structured to varying degrees in the different schools, but all of them had a coherent teaching strategy. The students received very few supporting written documents in TC training; instead, they worked on materials verbally and experientially. In the words of a student from E2C N6:

“We did these things more on a practical level, with games.” (OZE1)

The training programme was supervised informally by teachers and management, as well as formally at regular supervisory meetings. It was therefore vital that the staff involved were able to work effectively as a team.

3.2.3. Assessment

The six E2Cs used process-based, continuous assessment. Some of them conducted an initial diagnostic evaluation for candidate selection. Continuous assessment allowed teachers to adapt educational objectives, materials and activities for individuals and/or groups. Assessment was also conducted at the end of the training year. The acquisition of TCs was taken into account in the overall mark. Some E2Cs set the percentage of the final mark to which the TCs contributed; others had not defined it yet; and in others, it was dependent on the objective in question.

Teachers and the coordination team participated in the assessment process by applying the criteria as homogeneously as possible, although this was a major challenge for some of these E2Cs. Several schools were in the process of systematising their assessment procedures and defining criteria for evaluating TCs.

Students actively participated in their own assessment and talked to their tutor about their progress and that of their classmates. The student assessments' weighting as a percentage of the overall mark was not always clearly defined. The words of a manager of the E2C N1 reflect the difficulties faced by teachers in assessing TCs, especially in the consistent application of criteria:

“For me, the assessment is the most complicated thing, we don't all assess students in the same way. We don't work in the same way in the classroom, in workshops; some teachers see one thing, others see something else, that's what is most difficult.” (FGR)

3.2.4. Staff Training

The E2Cs studied valued qualifications and previous experience in the selection of new staff. TC managers and the teaching staff explained the programme to new members of the team as part of their induction process.

Teachers were well-disposed towards TC training and were interested in being trained to be able to teach TCs. These E2Cs promoted in-service training for their teachers.

3.2.5. The Business Sector

The results in Table 2 show that employers especially valued attitudinal aspects ($M = 9.72$, being the range of scores from 1 to 10). In their opinion, these aspects were much more important than technical training and work experience.

Table 2. Hiring requirements highly valued by companies.

Requirement (Rating Scale 1–10)	M	SD
Attitude (willingness, interest, responsibility, teamwork skills)	9.72	0.61
Technical and professional training	7.58	1.5
Previous work experience	6.34	1.91
Languages spoken	5.12	2.49
Financial support for employment	5.73	2.6
Age	5.49	2.58

Table 3 details the importance given to some of these requirements. Responsibility or task fulfilment ($M = 9.18$; $SD = 1.05$), respect for safety standards ($M = 9.17$; $SD = 1.30$) and teamworking skills ($M = 9.13$; $SD = 1.07$) were considered a priority (scoring range from 1 to 10).

Table 3. Importance of attitudes and skills.

Attitude or Skill (Rating Scale 1–10)	M	SD
Social skills and interpersonal communication	8.51	1.44
Teamworking skills and collaboration with colleagues	9.13	1.07
Confidence in own abilities (self-confidence)	8.41	1.13
Initiative	8.30	1.21
Autonomy	8.24	1.46
Fulfilment of assigned tasks	9.18	1.05
Interest in the outcome of work tasks	8.99	1.10
Maintaining order in the workplace	8.69	1.34
Flexibility and adaptability to different situations and demands	8.70	1.14
Analytical and planning skills	7.56	1.97
Accurate, high-quality work performance	8.52	1.15
Respect for safety standards	9.17	1.30

Table 4 shows the level of satisfaction of the companies on some aspects relating to the E2Cs and their students, assessed on a discrete rating scale from 1 (not satisfactory) to 10 (completely satisfactory).

Table 4. Satisfaction with several characteristics of the E2Cs.

Characteristic (Rating Scale 1–10)	M	SD
Promptness of response	9.30	0.98
Match between the job profile and the candidate	8.58	1.23
Attitudes of students in the workplace	8.15	1.35
Technical-professional qualifications for the job	7.97	1.38

In the open question on the qualities that employers most value in students from the E2Cs, 59 mentioned motivation and willingness to learn, 28 mentioned being versatile in the workplace, and 16 mentioned the importance of having had previous technical training. Of note was the fact that a total of 10 highlighted attendance and punctuality.

In addition, related to the open-ended question about the areas where more emphasis should be placed on training, employers suggested that the E2Cs should further their students' sense of responsibility and awareness of organisational culture (N = 22), time management and planning skills (N = 21), communication skills (N = 15) and agency (N = 11).

4. Conclusions and Discussion

The important role that TCs play in social functioning and entering into the labour market renders them key educational goals. This is especially true in the Initial Vocational Training of young people in vulnerability, as they enable individuals to become part of educational, social and employment settings [35–37].

According to Bakhshi et al., Olmos-Rueda and Villardón-Gallego et al. [22,28,38], young people who left the educational system without obtaining the compulsory basic qualifications find it difficult to join and/or remain in educational, social and employment settings, because they have limited TCs, among other reasons [36]. These competences are strong enablers of the integration of knowledge, values and attitudes in real-life situations [17,39].

The mission of E2Cs is to train early school leavers and to promote their social inclusion by helping them to gain employment. In addition to basic technical and academic education, a set of foundational TCs must be developed to this end. This study aimed to identify the key elements in TC training programmes for young people in vulnerable situations, and to analyse their good practices.

A first step in TC training is to decide which TCs students should work on. Both the entry and exit profile should be taken into account when making this decision. Regarding the entry profile, focus should be on those skills that are essential to life and employment and are the aims of compulsory education [40]. However, focusing on the essentials does not mean lowering learning expectations. In fact, high expectations are related to success, including young people in risk of exclusion [41].

As far as the design of the exit profile is concerned, employers are a fundamental source of information. Schools' academic vision is intended to complement employers' vision; the combination of both allows a specific exit profile based around the characteristics of society and the professional sector that the students are trained for [12,42]. In this study, the business sector highlighted the importance of competences such as a sense of responsibility, teamwork and respect for safety regulations. Consistent with these findings, the study by Olmos-Rueda and Mas-Torelló [12] showed how business agents highly valued skills related to adaptability, punctuality, responsibility and effort, both individually and in collaboration with others.

A series of key TCs for the training and development of students were found in the six programmes analysed: self-knowledge and self-confidence, teamwork, tolerance, interpersonal skills, responsibility, and emotional and conflict management. In line with other studies [12,43,44], technical knowledge, communication and relational skills, personal autonomy, self-control and motivation were also found to be essential.

The majority of the young population served by the E2Cs had experienced academic failure, which led to a loss of confidence in educational institutions and a decrease in academic self-efficacy. Therefore, working on competences such as self-confidence, motivation and interpersonal skills allows students to reverse a biography based on failure and mistrust [29]. A fundamental element of motivation is the perception that what is learnt is useful. Hence the importance of sensitising students to the relevance of TCs [45] in entering and remaining in the labour market, and fostering social integration [22]. The close collaboration between E2Cs and companies also contributes to the realisation that training and employment enables a good match between supply and demand [28].

A fluent relationship between partners allows students' development and performance to be improved through an effective response by E2Cs to any problematic situation in the workplace.

Education must focus on methodologies and good practices that have been proven successful for the learning and development of all students [46]. Previous studies have shown the effectiveness of the main features of the TC training programmes in the six E2Cs. Namely, TC training should be student-centred and based on experimentation and reflection. Activities should be varied and rely on real or realistic situations to foster experiential learning, since practice promotes learning [43,44]. However, students do not always readily accept an active role, as this requires a greater involvement in their learning process [17]. In this sense, reflection complements action. It helps to analyse learning situations and promotes the self-regulation of learning, self-knowledge, and control of emotions and behaviours [47].

TC training requires collaborative activities that enable interactive learning environments. Interaction encourages the development of competences such as teamwork, social skills conflict resolution and emotional control, and fosters learning and motivation [48]. Cooperative and collaborative learning facilitate the successful achievement of tasks [49], thus breaking away from an academic past characterised by failure and punishment [50].

Considering the heterogeneity of E2C students [6], TC training must be adapted not only to groups, but also to each student. In fact, versatility is a strong point of E2Cs; of the more training is adapted to students' needs, the more effective it is for learning [50]. Therefore, an initial diagnostic evaluation should be complemented by continuous assessment to adjust the ongoing process as required. As teachers are constantly in contact with students, they have a key role in tailoring the activities and materials to meet their needs and demands [46,47].

However, the evaluation of competences and the integration of the learning process into a qualification is a challenge faced by E2Cs. The very intangibility of TCs makes it difficult to find evidence and record the results consistently [23,48]. Competences can be assessed through performance, which is linked to the concept of authentic assessment [51,52]. Consequently, truly systematic evaluation entails setting up criteria and indicators, and using valid tools to collect information about indicators [53–55].

In order to achieve a comprehensive assessment, it is important to know how the different stakeholders value TC achievement. In E2Cs, TC assessment not only consists of an evaluation by teachers, but also of students' self-assessment and peer-assessment [8]. Individual and group reflection on the learning process has an important educational value for students. Using a broad range of evaluation tools and techniques allows information on various aspects to be triangulated from several participants. Eizagirre et al. [17] proposed writing qualitative assessment reports as an alternative to the traditional report card based on quantitative criteria.

The continuous improvement of TC training not only depends on the assessment of student learning, but also on an evaluation of the TC training programme itself (how objectives are prioritised and activities are adapted, timing, etc.). Turning the evaluation of TC programmes into an institutional practice contributes to their sustainability [56–58].

The E2Cs, in our study, implemented induction and monitoring processes for new teachers through information and support meetings as mechanisms for raising awareness of the importance of TCs. In addition, these E2Cs supported in-service teacher training and promoted activities according to detected needs. In-service teacher training based on scientific evidence promotes staff motivation and improves teaching. Hence, the use of digital media for accessing teaching materials (such as a repository of didactic strategies based on successful practice), and bibliographic references on TC training scientific publications can be a great help for teachers.

Through the analysis of good practices, several key aspects were identified that could be useful for the development of TCs. Firstly, the importance of TCs for gaining and maintaining employment and the social integration of young people in vulnerable situations. Secondly, the need to develop TCs together with technical skills in real or close-to-reality simulated situations. Thirdly, ensuring that the learning environment is based on interaction and support, where learning expectations were high and

success was recognised. In this way, students may increase their motivation to learn and improve their academic self-efficacy, while also gaining confidence in educational institutions.

In summary, the analysis of the six E2Cs showed a Vocational Training model focused on key TCs for employment and for social participation. This model was implemented through active, collaborative methodologies, where flexibility and adaptation to each individual student and to each group were essential, as well as the monitoring of student progress and the continuous support of teachers.

This study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research efforts. It has focused on analysing the key elements of TC training, but it would also be interesting to study the impact of this training on the mid-term employability of young people after completing their programmes. The current analysis could be complemented by an experimental study that compares the efficacy of different methodologies for the development of TCs in young people in vulnerable situations.

Despite the limitations mentioned, the study of the six E2Cs served to identify some characteristics of a systematic training of TCs within Vocational Training. This training facilitates re-entry into the education system and employability of young people at risk of social exclusion [59–61]. It also helps this group to regain confidence in their own capacities and abilities, and opens the door to a brighter future [54].

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Appendix A

Items reviewed in teaching materials.

- Theoretical frame of reference
- Correctly-worded objectives
- Objectives aimed at achieving TCs
- Activities consistent with the objectives
- Varied, interesting and suitably organised activities in increasing order of difficulty
- Timing. Time spent on activities to assess the feasibility of the programme
- Procedure to adapt the training programme to the students (group or individual)

The didactic material was assessed for:

- The variety of activities
- Degree to which material is adapted to students' needs

The following didactic strategy areas were reviewed:

- Contextualised activities to raise awareness of the importance of each competence
- Tutoring or group reflection on the development of the competences and how to transfer them to workshop activities

A number of aspects were evaluated regarding the evaluation system:

- Criteria and indicators consistent with the TCs

- Diverse, valid techniques to collect information about the TCs
- Specific, relative importance of each technique
- Participation of students in assessment
- Evaluation carried out at different times (start, during and end of process)
- Regular recording of information on TC indicators
- Proposed remedial actions in case of non-compliance
- Procedure for providing students with feedback about their performance to help them to improve

The following areas were reviewed with regard to teacher training:

- Training plan for new teachers
- Database with resources for TC training
- TC training available online and/or face-to-face
- Participation of the teaching staff in training evaluation
- Teaching guide for competence training

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