



## THE USE OF MANUAL WORK IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIFE SKILLS

Patrycja Mika

ORCID: 0000-0002-7957-9072

The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw

e-mail: pm65239@aps.edu.pl

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to present handwork education and handicraft education as an opportunity for developing widely understood life skills in children and adolescents. Progressing social changes force adolescents to acquire skills, allowing them to cope with the future environment and society. Reflection on the contemporary school shows that new ways of developing life skills in children should be sought. The practices of Scandinavian schools and the conducted research showing that one of the effective ways is education through handicrafts, may be a contribution to a broader discussion on new forms of education through handicrafts and manual work in the Polish educational system.

### WYKORZYSTANIE PRAC RĘCZNYCH W ROZWOJU UMIEJĘTNOŚCI ŻYCIOWYCH

**Słowa kluczowe:** praca ręczna, edukacja rękodzielnicza, sloyd, umiejętności życiowe, edukacja

**Streszczenie.** Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie edukacji prac ręcznych i edukacji rękodzielniczej jako szansy dla rozwijania w dzieciach i młodzieży szeroko rozumianych umiejętności życiowych. Postępujące zmiany społeczne wymuszają na adolescentach nabywanie umiejętności, pozwalających im poradzić sobie w przyszłym środowisku i społeczeństwie. Refleksja nad współczesną szkołą pokazuje, że należy szukać nowych dróg rozwijania w dzieciach umiejętności życiowych. Praktyki szkół skandynawskich oraz przeprowadzone badania, ukazujące, że jedną ze skutecznych dróg jest edukacja poprzez rękodzieło, mogą być przyczynkiem do szerszej dyskusji na temat nowych form edukacji poprzez rękodzieło i prace ręczne w polskim systemie edukacji.

## Introduction

The modern reality is characterized by volatility, liquidity (Bauman, 2000), fragmentation and individualization of social life. Social, political, cultural as well as economic changes have led to a phenomenon described by Ulrich Beck (2004) as *homo optionis*, i.e. a man who is forced to make constant choices. These choices are also dictated by the constant need to verify the information and verify authorities. A young person must acquire the so-called life skills to be able to find his/her way in the modern and future reality, which will make it easier for them to achieve the desired goals and mental well-being. Education in this area should begin from the early years, and handwork and handicraft education can be particularly useful forms of work for those purposes.

## Life skills – definitions

Acquiring life skills enables an individual to adapt to a situation he/she is facing and helps him/her to effectively deal with problems, requirements and everyday tasks. The WHO (1994) has specified a range of skills, defining them as life skills. These are:

- decision-making
- problem-solving
- creative thinking
- critical thinking
- effective communication
- the ability to establish interpersonal relations
- self-awareness
- empathy
- coping with emotions
- coping with stress.

Barbara Woynarowska (2002) distinguished six types of life skills. These are:

1. Interpersonal skills involving proper communication with other people (active listening, providing and receiving feedback, verbal and non-verbal communication, assertiveness, negotiating, conflict resolution);
2. Self-awareness building skills (self-esteem, positive thinking, recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses);

3. Ability to build one's own system of values (creating one's own hierarchy of values, making efforts to promote social responsibility and justice);
4. Decision-making skills (critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, searching for alternatives, anticipating the consequences of one's own actions, setting goals and achieving them);
5. Coping with stress and stress management skills (self-control, coping with failure and frustration, searching for help);
6. Livelihood skills (entrepreneurial thinking skills, money-earning skills, learning the basics of economics).

It is also emphasised that there is a need to differentiate between life skills and human qualities (characteristics) (Woynarowska, 2002). These qualities include, for example, honesty and responsibility, patience, and meticulousity. However, they are closely linked to life skills (Wolska, 2015).

Equipping an individual with a package of the aforementioned skills can allow him/her to avoid the pitfalls of *homo optionis*. Self-confidence and self-agency will allow the adult to avoid the necessity to constantly seek confirmation for his/her decisions, and critical thinking will enable him/her to question certain problems.

## **Handicraft education – historical context and concepts**

Handicraft education involves such terms as craft, sloyd, handwork, and manual work. The concept most closely related to the issue of handicraft education is sloyd, started in the 1850s by a Finnish educator Uno Cygnaeus and developed by his Swedish successor Otto Salomon (Dugger Jr., 2010). The Swedish word “sloyd” means agility. It was a handicraft-based education system which used natural materials (mostly wood, wicker, clay, and fabric). During the creative process, one person made an item from start to finish.

Sloyd was supposed to teach respect to and pleasure from manual labour, the habit of independence, order, accuracy, development of attentiveness and manual coordination. The creative process was key, not the effect itself (Salomon, 1892). The sloyd concept of education is inseparably linked to the principle of systematicity, the logical sequence of successive actions, and the principle of graduated difficulty in the use of simple tools and utensils (Uberman, 2012).

The concept was initially directed to children above 9 years old, regardless of sex. One of the tenets of the sloyd education was the use of manual work

as a means for developing both physical and mental skills that would be useful in future life.

The main centre of the sloyd concept was the school in Naäs, founded by Otto Salomon. One of its tasks was to train teachers to conduct handicraft lessons. A second school called *Slöjd Teachers Seminary* was established three years later. It was a place of national and international training for teachers, official missions and committees (Lawn, 2018).

The sloyd education successfully spread in Scandinavian countries, but other countries were also deeply interested in such an approach to education. At the beginning of the 20th century, the promoters of this idea in the United States were Meri Toppelius and Gustaf Larsson (Lawn, 2018), and in the following years, John Dewey referred to Cygnaeus and Salomon's tenets in his concepts of learning by acting (Dewey 2016, 2005, 1957).

The first practitioners who propagated the sloyd concepts in Poland were Józef Siedmiograj and Franciszek Pększyc (Przanowski, 1936), and also Kazimierz Bruchnalski, Józef Przyłuski and Maria Dunin-Sulgotowska (Ambroziewicz, 1964). Władysław Przanowski played the biggest role in the development of Polish expertise in handicraft education. Not only did he adapt the tenets of the Swedish sloyd to the Polish conditions, but also created from scratch the outline of a course called *handicrafts*, and as a result of his efforts that course was taught in mainstream schools. At the same time, he was the founder and director of the State Institute of Handicrafts (PIRR). The handicrafts school subject fitted in with the ideas behind the concept of the creative school (Rowid, 1958) and paidocentric upbringing visions which were developing at the beginning of the 20th century.

After World War II, initially, it was the PIRR students and staff who dealt with the handicraft education, also pre-war textbooks were used. Over time, the practical subjects were sidelined, and as a consequence, they were degraded to arts and crafts in the higher grades, and in integrated education, the materials and tools recommended for use by children were limited.

#### Handicraft education – contemporary context

Nowadays, the tenets of handicraft education have been forgotten in most countries, except for Scandinavia, where they are still present in the school space. These tenets have evolved and have been adapted to contemporary conditions. An approach to the concept of education, called STEAM, in which the letter „A” stands for „Art,” meaning art and a humanistic approach, has become a new solution. In STEAM, art is understood as the key to developing good habits

and practices. As scientific observations (Walker, 2017) and research indicate, Finland has ranked high in PISA surveys for years (2015, 2018). At the same time, it was one of the first countries to start implementing the STEAM method in education, with particular consideration of handicraft education as a creative learning method (Kokko et al. 2020).

In Polish schools, handicraft education is treated as an addition to other subjects. Contemporary school subjects, such as visual arts or technology moved away from the sloyd concept and handwork. The reasons for this are complex (Jellinek, 2018). However, one should consider whether, with a little willingness and proper organization, it would be possible to reactivate handicraft classes in preschool and school education. Undoubtedly, handicraft allows children to acquire skills and habits of using tools, and master manual skills, which, despite digitisation and technical development, are still valid today, as it introduces them to the world of technology (Uberman, 2012), promotes the development of life skills and soft skills needed in later life.

## **Handicraft education as life skills education**

Handicraft education aims at educating the child's whole personality. It means that it should promote role models who are desired from the point of view both of an individual and the entire society. The main task is the skill of planning, decision-making, cooperation, anticipating, innovativeness, perseverance and consistency (Virta, Metsarinne and Kallio, 2011).

Research indicates (Mäki-Vaurio, 2015) that children who regularly attend handicraft workshops and classes acquire the following qualities: creativity, goal orientation, problem-solving ability, willingness to take the initiative and ability to work together as a team.

Proper organisation of a place for handicraft classes facilitates the development of interpersonal skills. Handicraft classes are typically much less rigid than standard lessons in classrooms. Students have a chance to exchange views, comments and ideas concerning a specific topic, and working around one table facilitates conversations and discussions. Students learn to ask for help from peers who have mastered a certain skill, and shy students can in turn peek at how to perform an activity. Children learn to listen as well as to speak to others in an understandable way. In handicraft education, there is room for the development of peer mentoring. Individual students reveal their natural leadership skills. In this way, children not only make friends but discuss topics related to the work

they perform, often coming up with innovations together and unintentionally brainstorming. This allows them to learn how to cooperate.

Making a specific item with their own hands, which can then be taken home and used on a daily basis, significantly impacts the development of a child's self-esteem and self-agency. In handicraft education, categorising numerical grades are not normally used, but it is desired that the teacher uses a descriptive assessment, emphasising the strengths of the child's work while pointing to areas for improvement. A student who goes through the entire creative process from the beginning on his/her own feels proud about his/her work and effort, and his/her self-esteem increases. It is an important aspect of building self-awareness in the future. Handicraft education provides a very solid basis for this.

Dewey (1957, p. 72) asks why „*no one has ever been able to explain why it is children outside of school who have so many questions, and why, on the contrary, they show an astonishing lack of interest in school material?*” and immediately answers, „*The whole system of upbringing is to blame. From seemingly problematic it must become truly problematized.*” The contemporary school lacks space for a workshop, a laboratory, and tools and materials that could be used by children. The development of traits such as curiosity, patience, perseverance, alertness, and ingenuity involves active work of the child in favourable conditions, where the child needs to have a space for work, as well as proper tools and materials. Then the child's curiosity has room to examine, experiment, and think critically and creatively.

The practical nature of handicraft education forces children to face various problems and challenges associated with a child's natural resistance to take further action (Westerlund and Samuelsson, 2021). Resistance puts the individual in a state of uncertainty, where previously established plans are disrupted and existing solutions are no longer sufficient. A problematic situation can lead to a dual reaction: on the one hand, the individual can take steps to understand the problem and come up with an innovation to solve it, or, on the other hand, the individual's resistance may cause stress, frustration and no further action. When a child attempts to perform a certain action, e.g. hammer a nail into a board, he/she may encounter some problems (e.g. the board is unstable on the table). Then, the desire to perform such activity leads to the need to come up with a new way to solve the problem, i.e. innovativeness. Handicraft education allows us to face internal resistance and transform it into learning how to deal with difficult situations and emotions, e.g. frustration.

The contemporary debate on education (in Finland in particular) has highlighted the significant importance of the ability to deal with adversity, not giving up, completing activities that have been started, decision-making and believing that the actions taken will bring tangible results (Duckworth, 2017). Handicraft education, thanks to creating space for experimental and practical activities, and thus developing new approaches to problem-solving, is indicated as particularly useful in acquiring “*fortitude*” and qualities such as decision-making, problem-solving, innovativeness, perseverance (Tyson, 2019) or creative thinking.

Making specific items can become a unique opportunity to build economic awareness in children, to which more and more attention is being paid nowadays. One can easily imagine a situation, where a class which is taught handicrafts organises a festive exhibition of works or a fair where handicrafts made in class can be purchased for a certain amount. Such income can be later spent on common class expenses, which teaches children not only the basics of economics but also responsibility and micro-entrepreneurship. This also involves social responsibility and building an individual hierarchy of values, which was already raised in the context of handicrafts by F. Froebel (1864). Such an approach teaches empathy and taking action to support responsibility and social justice, and initiates the formation of children’s moral and ethical behaviour. Students acting in this way learn how to be responsible citizens and have a broader view of the matters of other people.

At the same time, studies (Aksman, 2021) carried out in primary schools in Małopolska Province indicate that visual arts education develops in children the ability to make decisions, self-control, deal with difficult situations and manage stress. Children that regularly attended visual arts classes also demonstrated higher interpersonal competencies. The results of these studies provide a sound basis for the assertion that handicraft education also develops these skills.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to invoke the ideas of sloyd, handwork and handicraft that were extensively developed in Europe and around the world since the mid-19th century, and to show their important role in developing life skills for children and young people. Nowadays, the concepts of handwork and handicraft are forgotten; however, they have not lost their pedagogical value. At the same time, pedagogical observations confirm that contemporary schools do not sufficiently develop key competencies and life skills. However,

it is necessary to observe good practices and seek methods for their implementation into the Polish education system.

A good example would be the Scandinavian educational models, where handicraft subjects are still included as mandatory in the basic curriculum.

Today, many people might think that handicraft education is not necessary in the era of omnipresent digitisation and technical development; however, it should be emphasised that handwork can indeed be an extremely effective (and enjoyable) learning method, not only when it comes to agility and use of items and tools, but, above all, it is an opportunity to acquire and develop all life skills for children, which they need for their proper functioning in the future.

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