



## EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL CHOICES OF STUDENTS IN POST-SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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**Keywords:** educational choices, occupation, work, career, interests

**Abstract.** Educational and professional choices in the modern world are complex and take place at three/four stages of education (taking into account the 2017 reform of the education system). Young people from the higher grades of primary school (previously lower secondary school) are in the process of transitioning from the world of education to the world of work. It is a special time in this age group when a young person makes decisions that may have consequences for his or her career. The article is devoted to the educational and vocational choices of high school students while taking into account the research conducted. It refers primarily to the motives for choosing a secondary school, interests, as well as career plans. The main part of the article presents the results of research conducted among 236 high school students. The study also includes generalizations and conclusions from the research.

WYBORY EDUKACYJNO-ZAWODOWE UCZNIÓW/  
UCZENNIC SZKÓŁ PONADPODSTAWOWYCH

**Słowa kluczowe:** wybory edukacyjne, zawód, praca zawodowa, kariera zawodowa, zainteresowania

**Streszczenie.** Wybory edukacyjno-zawodowe, które podejmowane są we współczesnym świecie, charakteryzują się złożonością, gdyż odbywają się na trzech/czterech etapach edukacyjnych (z uwzględnieniem reformy systemu oświaty z 2017 r.). Młodzież już od wyższych klas szkoły podstawowej (wcześniej gimnazjum) bierze udział w procesie przejścia ze świata edukacji do świata pracy. Jest to szczególnie czas w tej kategorii wiekowej, kiedy młody człowiek podejmuje decyzje, które mogą mieć konsekwencje dla jego kariery zawodowej. Artykuł jest poświęcony wyborom edukacyjno-zawodowym uczniów/uczennic szkół ponadpodstawowych, z jednoczesnym uwzględnieniem przeprowadzonych badań. Odniesiono się w nim przede wszystkim do motywów wyboru szkoły ponadpodstawowej, zainteresowań, jak i planów zawodowych młodzieży. W części właściwej artykułu zostały zaprezentowane wyniki badań przeprowadzonych wśród 236 uczniów szkół ponadpodstawowych. W opracowaniu uwzględniono również uogólnienia i wnioski z badań.

## Introduction

The dynamically changing political, social, and cultural reality affects all areas of human life (Beck, 2002), including education, which is an integral and autonomous part of the socio-economic system (Gerlach, Tomaszewska-Lipiec, 2017, p. 9). Choosing an educational and vocational path is one of the most important decisions a young person makes. Today, in times of tremendous risk caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in periods of disrupted education, as well as in the face of the war in Ukraine, inflation, and an uncertain future, along with a revision of lifestyles and values, decisions regarding school choice and subsequent career paths pose significant challenges for young people. Despite these changes, a profession still serves as a template for identification, through which we assess individuals in terms of their personal needs, abilities, economic and social positions (Drabik-Podgórna, Podgórna, 2016, p. 5). However, Jean Guichard and Michel Huteau draw attention to the so-called “chaos of career paths”, which stems from the fact that all work organization systems (professional, Fordist, and technical)<sup>1</sup> coexist in the modern labour market.

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<sup>1</sup> The professional system, developed at the beginning of the 20th century, is characterized by an individual who, during a long-lasting education process, acquired a specific body of knowledge and skills (a profession), which became their own, and thereby also an element constituting their identity. The Fordist system is based on assembly and the production line, and it does not require from the worker years of education and profession acquiring, because the workplace is the place of acquiring qualifications. In this system of work, qualifications ceased to be the property of the worker, but were linked to the position held. The technical (competence-based) system emerged as a result of automation and computerization processes. In this system of work, various specific skills not tied to one profession but to interactions created by the work situation began to play an important role, such as the ability to work in a group, perform under time pressure, communicate effectively, be flexible, etc. (Guichard, Huteau, 2005, p. 13).

There are still individuals in the contemporary labour market who work within the professional system, while others remain employed in factories and manufacturing facilities. However, an increasing number of workers are organized according to the competency-based system, in the context of flexible working hours, loosened ties to the workplace, and changes in labour laws (Beck, 2004). Analysing changes in career development in the context of a fluid and chaotic reality, Augustyn Bańka emphasizes the devaluation of “hard” professions and competencies, while considering proactivity and decisiveness as new measures of creative adaptation to the contemporary, blurred reality of the labour market. According to him, these factors enable the building of career capital, the development of competencies, and intentional construction of the future, allowing for both a sense of coherence and belief in the ability to control one’s own life.

In the face of this changing reality, the following questions arise: What motivations currently guide students in secondary schools when choosing their further educational path? From which sources do they gather information about their future educational direction and career choices? Who from the student’s environment has the greatest influence on their decision to pursue education in a specific type of secondary school?

As shown by previous research, among the factors influencing the choice of further educational path, we can distinguish demographic, social, and psychological factors related to individual characteristics (e.g., Kozielska, 2018; Kruszakin, 2017; Kwieciński, 2001; Mandrzejewska-Smół, 2005; Oleszczyk, 2020; Palka, 2011; Parzęcki, 2010; Zajdel, 2009; Zaleszczyk, Kot, 2015). It is important, in the face of current changes related to the educational system reform of 2017, to identify the main motives behind educational choices among the new group of students (graduates of 8-year primary schools) in order to provide them with appropriate support at earlier stages of education.

## **Study design**

The research project aimed to gather empirical data that would allow for the determination of students’ educational and vocational choices in secondary schools, as well as gain knowledge about contemporary factors influencing students’ decisions regarding their future educational paths. The main question addressed in the project was: What are the main motives for choosing a particular type of secondary school? To conduct the study, a self-designed survey

questionnaire was administered to secondary school students. The questionnaire consisted of 29 questions, divided into two parts:

1) Demographic section, which collected data on gender, age, place of residence, type of school attended by the respondent, and parents' education.

2) 22 main questions related to: motives for choosing a secondary school (including factors influencing the choice of secondary school and sources of information about schools), interests, expectations related to future educational and vocational choices, and values.

The entire survey was conducted within the positivist paradigm and followed a quantitative research strategy.

### Characteristics of the research group

The research was conducted among 236 students from secondary schools. Among the respondents, 57% were male, 39% were female, and 4% identified as the 'other' gender. Among the students in secondary schools, the majority (65%) were graduates of a 3-year middle school (gimnazjum), while the rest had completed an 8-year primary school.

The study involved students from various types of schools (Figure 1).

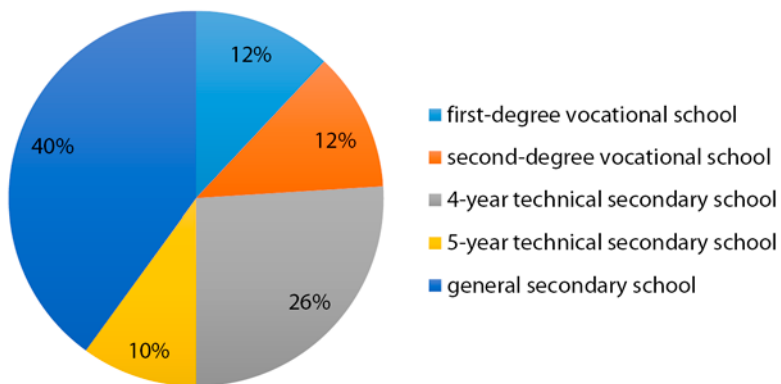


Figure 1. Type of school attended by the student.

Source: Authors' own work.

As indicated by the above figure, the largest number of respondents are students from general high schools (40%), followed by students from 4-year technical schools (26%), first-degree vocational schools (12%), second-degree vocational schools (12%), and the least represented group is students from 5-year

technical schools. One factor that may influence the choice of school and future occupation is the parents' education. Data on this subject are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Level of parents' education.

Education level	Father N=236	%	Mother N=236	%
Elementary or below	5	2.1	3	1
Secondary (middle school)	2	0.8	5	2.1
Vocational training	18	5.5	15	6.3
Secondary (high school) / vocational secondary	74	31.3	66	28
Higher	102	43.2	120	50.8
Unknown	35	14.8	27	11.4

Source: Authors' own work.

According to the research findings, the parents' education does not differ based on the gender of the parent. Half of the respondents' mothers (50.8%) have higher education, while higher education among their fathers accounts for 43.2%. The second most common category is secondary education (31.3% among fathers and 28% among mothers), while vocational education is represented by 5.5% of fathers and 6.3% of mothers. A small percentage of parents have completed middle school education (0.8% among fathers and 2.1% among mothers) or primary education (2.1% among fathers and 1% among mothers). It is noteworthy that some students do not have information about their parents' education (14.8% of fathers and 11.4% of mothers). These findings confirm the data regarding the education of Generation Y (1980-1989), who hypothetically are the parents of the surveyed students (Generation XYZ).

Another aspect is the place of origin of the respondents. The majority of them (87%) come from urban areas, while only 13% come from rural areas.

## Study results

The issue of educational and vocational choices made by students in secondary schools seems relevant, as the overall legal and moral obligations that young individuals face due to their choice of a particular profession define what we call a social function. At the same time, the set of rights resulting from this function

determines the social position of an individual within a specific community (Sztumski, 1999, p. 51).

Who has the greatest influence on the choice of educational path? According to the surveyed students, the choice of the school they currently attend is primarily driven by their interests (42.7%).

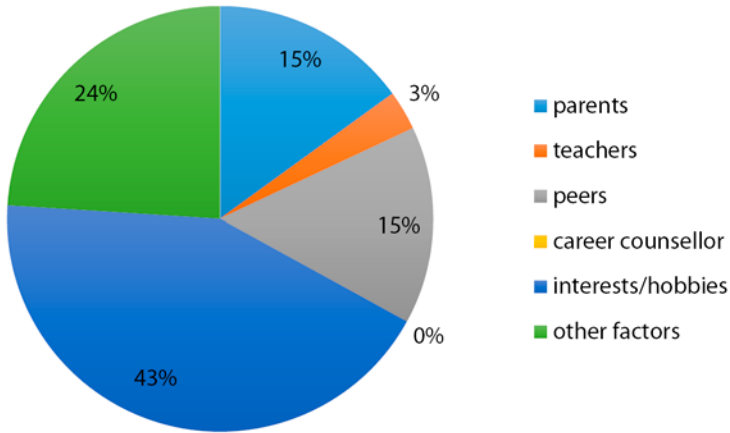


Figure 2. Source of influence on the choice of student's educational path.

Source: Authors' own work.

The research results indicate that career counsellors have no influence on the choice of secondary school (0%), and teachers from their previous school have a minimal influence (3%) on the students' decisions. While parents might be expected to play a significant role in the decision-making process, the data from the research contradict this assumption. According to the students, only 15% of parents had an impact on their choices. Although this result may come as a surprise, it is positive considering that parents who choose a profession for their child without considering their actual abilities, possibilities, and desires often achieve only apparent desired effects (Sztumski, 1999, p. 54). It is worth noting that 24% of the respondents indicated other factors. In response to an open-ended question, predictors of their current school choice mentioned by the students included: place of residence (distance from home), educational level, desire to acquire a profession and enter the job market, life situation, family situation, health condition, and the possibility of combining study and work.

While 42.7% of the respondents identified interests and hobbies as a determining factor in their choice of educational path in the general question,

the students confirmed this choice (46%) when asked specifically *if their current school choice is related to their interests*. 28% of the students denied that their current educational path correlates with their interests, while 26% were undecided between the two specific response options.

The choice of the school they attend is most often related to their vision of future occupation and workplace (Figure 3). As the research results show, the majority of young people would like to work in a private company (37%) or run their own business (36%).

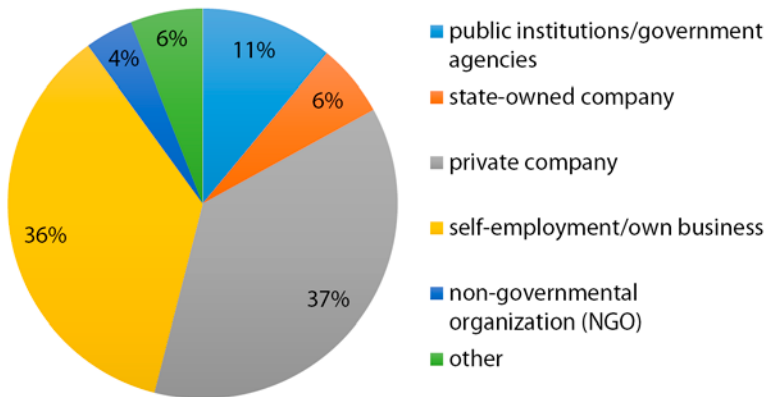


Figure 3. Place of employment where the student would like to work after obtaining a profession.

Source: Own work.

After acquiring their profession, students from secondary schools would most prefer to be employed in private companies (37%) or start their own businesses (36%). Other respondents chose to work in public institutions (11%), state-owned companies (6%), non-governmental organizations (4%), or other places (6%), pursuing artistic professions (e.g., musician, artist-painter), or they are still undecided, as indicated by the response “don’t know”.

In response to the question *In which profession are you most likely to work?*, the most frequently mentioned professions were programmer, IT specialist, computer graphic designer, psychologist, therapist, lawyer, and soldier. It is worth noting that at this stage of education, some respondents have not yet specified the occupation in which they would like to work in the future.

*What or who has the greatest influence on your choice of the appropriate educational path?* The responses to this question are presented in Figure 4.

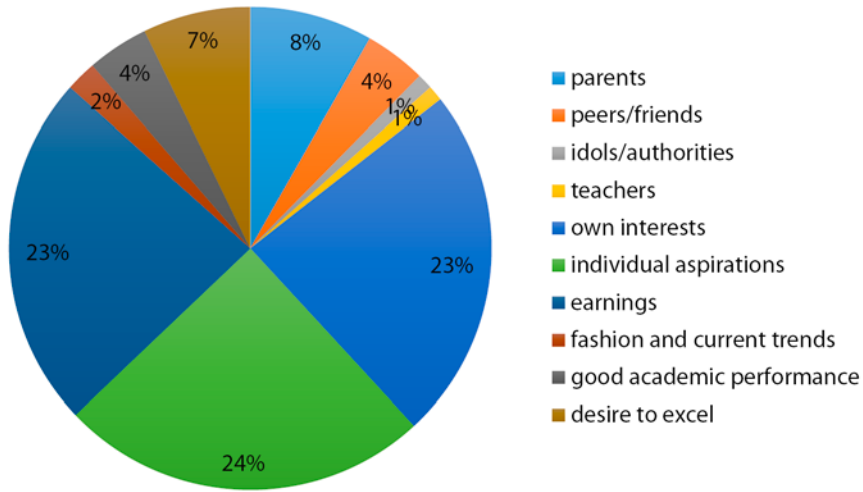


Figure 4. Source of influence on the appropriate choice of education direction and profession.

Source: Authors' own work.

Data collected among students from secondary schools indicates that when choosing their educational path and future profession, they are most often guided by their own ambitions (24%), interests (23%), and earnings (23%). The least influential factors in their choices are teachers (1%), idols/authorities (1%), fashion and current trends (2%), or good academic performance (4%). These results are both optimistic, as contemporary young people pursue their own ambitions and interests, and surprising, as parents have a minimal influence (8%), while teachers (1%) and authorities (1%) have almost no influence.

To practice the chosen profession, the majority of individuals are required to pursue further education and professional development. The respondents who participated in the research are mostly aware that their current school does not conclude their education. The results of the research regarding the form of further education are presented in Figure 5.



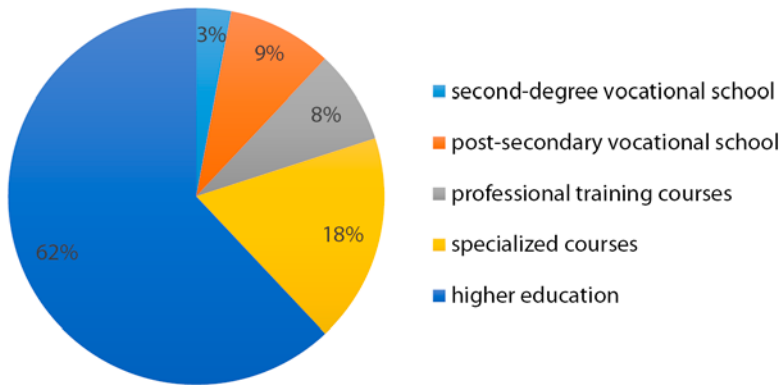


Figure 5. Forms of further education and qualification improvement.

Source: Authors' own work.

The most commonly chosen form of education after the current stage of education, according to students from secondary schools, is higher education (62%). Others opted for different forms of education and skills enhancement, such as specialized courses (18%), vocational qualification courses (8%), post-secondary school (9%), and second-degree vocational school (3%). Considering that 87% of students are currently studying in schools where they can take the secondary school-leaving exam (*matura*) that allows them to apply for higher education, not all respondents plan to pursue this educational path. Additionally, a smaller number of students from first-degree vocational schools are currently considering further education in second-degree vocational schools.

However, it is important to note the mode in which respondents intend to continue their education or enhance their professional qualifications. The results of the conducted research indicate that out of 236 students, 109 would like to continue their education in full-time mode (46%), 23 prefer evening classes (11%), 62 respondents (26%) are interested in part-time studies, 32 individuals wish to learn or enhance their qualifications through distance learning, and 12 people selected external mode (5%).

The last question regarding the future plans of students related to their educational and professional choices pertained to their intentions to work abroad. Among the respondents, as many as 31% indicated their desire to go abroad after completing school, while only 26% expressed their intention to stay in the country. The highest percentage was represented by those who were currently unable

to determine their plans. The most common reasons for deciding to work abroad were the prospect of a better life (24%), higher earning potential (22%), limited professional development opportunities in the country (7%), and the desire to learn a foreign language (7%).

## Summary

In modern society, knowledge has become the fundamental capital that determines social status. Research results on educational choices among students in secondary schools who have completed both lower secondary school and an 8-year primary school clearly demonstrate their awareness of this state of affairs. This is evident in their choices (as well as the consistency in their implementation) and the construction of their professional career perspectives.

A summary of the conducted research allows us to address the research question: what are the main motives for choosing a specific type of secondary school? Analysis of the obtained results indicates that among the youth, the most frequently chosen type of secondary school is a general high school (*liceum ogólnokształcące*), while slightly fewer individuals opt for a technical school (*technikum*), which offers vocational training and immediate entry into the job market upon completion. The educational background of parents also influences educational and vocational choices. Among students in secondary schools, the majority of parents possess higher or secondary education, without differentiation based on gender. The interests and hobbies of students have the greatest impact on their choice of educational path. According to the research, parents have minimal influence on the choices made by their children. It is interesting, therefore, to note that decisions regarding further education are made independently by the youth and do not depend on career advisors or teachers themselves.

Regarding their vision of future employment, students aspire to work in private enterprises or establish their own businesses. In terms of choosing future occupations, the most popular professions include: programmer, computer scientist, graphic designer, lawyer, psychologist, therapist, and soldier. Taking into account the current socio-political situation and the conditions prevailing in the job market, it can be surmised that the contemporary youth are both responding to its needs and following the popularity of certain professions (e.g., those in the IT industry).

When planning their future careers, young people are primarily guided by their own ambitions, interests, and the remuneration associated with their chosen profession. The analysis has revealed that students are focused on themselves and their own plans, not influenced by fashion trends, authorities, or even the opinions of their peers and friends. What matters is that they have a concrete vision of the profession they would like to pursue, as well as a chosen path that will lead them to their goals. The decisive majority plan to pursue higher education and further enhance their qualifications by participating in specialized courses or vocational training programs. According to the research, one in three individuals studying in secondary schools intends to leave the country and work abroad. The main reasons for adopting such a perspective are the vision of a better life and higher earnings.

## Conclusions

In a world of tremendous change, the process of choosing educational paths, professions, and careers unfolds differently than even a decade ago. When making decisions regarding education and career choices, young people are primarily guided by their own interests, passions, ambitions, and the vision of remuneration associated with their future work. They only minimally consider the experiences of their parents, teachers, authorities, or specialists such as career advisors. While it may seem that their choices driven by personal beliefs, passions, and interests are valid, they are not necessarily aligned with objective realities.

It is important to emphasize that the ongoing and constant division of labour, particularly evident in highly industrialized countries, necessitates changes in the field of career counselling and guidance. These changes would allow for:

- 1) Providing reliable information about available occupations, especially to young people attending secondary schools, as well as about the current job market demand.
- 2) Assessing the suitability of candidates for specific occupations.

Educational and vocational choices are shaped by technological, scientific, and socio-economic progress in a given society. Considerations regarding the factors influencing school and career choices should take into account the specific socio-economic conditions of the society, its current scientific and technological advancements, as well as the labour market situation. Choosing a profession is a crucial decision in a person's life that should be made with a deep awareness of the realities of time, space, and a sense of responsibility. However, it is essential

to remember that young individuals are shaped by their family, school, social, and cultural environments. Therefore, throughout the process of education and upbringing, we, as members of those environments, should be aware of the role we play in the educational and vocational choices of future workers.

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