



VOCATIONAL SCHOOL IN THE LOGIC OF SOCIO- -ECONOMIC GROWTH AND EXPERIMENTS OF POST-MODERNITY

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Abstract. The article presents the functioning of a vocational school, taking into account changes in the education system introduced by subsequent reforms implemented after 1999. The aim of the considerations was to locate these changes in the logic of socio-economic “growth” and the experiments of postmodernity. The analyses were based on scientific literature in this field, as well as educational documents.

SZKOŁA ZAWODOWA W LOGICE SPOŁECZNO-GOSPODARCZEGO WZROSTU I EKSPERYMENTACH PONOWOCZESNOŚCI

Słowa kluczowe: szkoła zawodowa, społeczno-gospodarczy wzrost, eksperymenty ponowoczesności

Streszczenie. W artykule przedstawiono funkcjonowanie szkoły zawodowej z uwzględnieniem zmian systemu edukacji wprowadzanych kolejnymi reformami realizowanymi po 1999 roku. Celem rozważań było umiejscowienie tych zmian w logice społeczno-gospodarczego „wzrostu” oraz eksperymentach ponowoczesności. Prowadzone analizy oparto na literaturze naukowej z tego zakresu, a także dokumentach oświatowych.

Introduction

Publications and discussions on contemporary schools most often pertain to their entirety or general education institutions. The issue of vocational schools is very rarely considered. Recognizing the importance of this issue, I have chosen the vocational school as the subject of my paper, attempting to place it within the logic of socio-economic “growth” and postmodern experiments. I deemed it appropriate to discuss, or at least signal, this topic, in part because for many years, vocational schools were treated as “inferior” to general education schools, as offering fewer opportunities for development and further careers. “In social consciousness, the belief was awakened that vocational schools are places for ‘losers’, to which parents should not send their children” (Pogorzelska, 2017, p. 299). In practice, this was often the case.

We are currently in the period of implementing another version of the education reform. Many commentators, including those in academia, believe that changes in education, including vocational education, were created to meet the needs of the “good change”. Without delving into such narratives, one must consider whether this “new” vocational school will prepare graduates for employment in the capricious, uncertain, and rapidly changing job market characterized by the titular postmodernity.

Education reforms in the logic of socio-economic “growth”

Reflecting retrospectively and referring to the logic of socio-economic “growth,” it should be remembered that the last three decades of political and socio-economic changes have brought many successive reforms to Polish education, including vocational training, which were nullified with each change in the political paradigm. This was a period of a rolling revolution, where many banner slogans were launched, for example, in 1999 – “Less knowledge, more understanding of the world,” in 2012 – “Vocational school as a positive choice,” in 2016 – “Good school” (Pogorzelska, 2019, p. 194).

Analysing the legal provisions related to successive reforms in the education system, it can be noticed that each change brought with it a different map of schools, reorganization of education, and above all chaos, anxiety among teachers, parents, local authorities, and a lack of reliable justification – especially when it comes to vocational schooling, which, especially in the initial period,

under the influence of many negative opinions questioning the justification for the existence of such schools, experienced a period of decline and constituted only a backdrop for the educational system. The systemic reform of 1999 assumed the transformation of all secondary schools, general high schools, and technical schools into three-year profiled high schools. The reformers left basic vocational schools, however, they planned to limit their scope to about 20% of junior high school graduates. The school reform was supposed to reduce the percentage of students heading to vocational schools in favour of complete secondary schools. General high schools were to have various vocational profiles and prepare both for higher studies and for entering the job market. It was planned that within 10 years, the percentage starting education in vocational schools would gradually decrease. This indeed happened. These actions harmed vocational schools not only in terms of image but led to the marginalization of this educational area; they led to the devastation of their potential, educational, and also the departure of vocational education teachers from the profession. From a time perspective, it seems that this reform was carried out somewhat “blindly,” without thorough and long-term analysis of the level and economic needs, social expectations, and prospective thinking. Chaos crept into the vocational education system, worse, the ties between schools and the economy were broken. Perhaps the reason for this was the fact that, as experiences from other countries show, there are many alternative models in the area of vocational training. Fortunately, there is now a reverse tendency, causing a systematic increase in the number of students in vocational schools (branch schools of the first and second degree and technical secondary schools), which exceeds the number of students in general education high schools.

The next significant change to the education system was introduced by the reform of 2012. It served as a correction to its predecessor, especially in relation to the vocational education system. It was popularized under the slogan “Vocational School, a School of Positive Choice”. “The fundamental premise of this vocational education reform is about bringing the world of work and vocational education closer together, about properly preparing graduates to enter the job market, about conducting vocational education, especially practical training, in connection with employers, about the possibility of supplementing knowledge and skills both at school and in the workplace, about supporting professional mobility, and about the ability to create and manage one’s own career” (Pogorzelska, 2017, p. 300). The Minister of National Education declared the 2014/2015 school year the “Year of Vocational School Students” and introduced a series

of initiatives and actions, funded both from the state budget and European structural and investment funds (*ibidem*).

Reality showed that it was not even possible to verify the effects of these efforts and objectively assess them. This reform was annulled already in 2016 by the next governing authority. “Programmatic slogans of the ‘new’ reform were heavily promoted, while questioning all previous solutions in the field of vocational education. The haste with which these changes were introduced suggests that it was a reform constructed for political demand, to fulfil electoral promises within the so-called good change” (Pogorzelska, 2019, p. 194), rather than to genuinely support vocational education with positive solutions.

The 2017 reform appears to be a clear reflection of all the phenomena described above. Processed through efficient political marketing, media hype, and presented at many regional conferences, it was finally announced under the slogan “Good Vocational School” (*ibidem*, p. 194).

The solutions proposed in the 2017-2019 reform can be considered in many areas, such as structural, programmatic, organizational, and financial. Analysing the structural change, one might get the impression that “everything has already been there”. There was a return to the 5-year technical school, which functioned in the education system until 1999. Vocational schools of the first and second degree, publicized in public discussions, were established to replace basic vocational schools (essentially nothing but the name changed) and supplementary technical schools. According to the Ministry of National Education, the introduction of the vocational school stems from the need to change the image of this part of the schooling system in society, raise its prestige, and present it as an attractive vocational path for young people. The superficiality of this argument and the belief that merely changing the name will transform societal attitudes seem inappropriate. Moreover, it is worth recalling that such nomenclature was used by the Central Office for Vocational Training established in the 1950s, which referred to its vocational education institutions in this way. Furthermore, this proposal does not take into account the fact that strong and distinctly emphasized sectors usually operate in metropolitan centres, whereas the local reality consists of fragmented economic activity and small capital potential of enterprises, along with marginal interest from entrepreneurs in vocational education issues. It seems that in this situation, a good solution would be the possibility of creating so-called multi-vocational classes, in which students of many professions would learn theory together, and practical training would be conducted at their employers or in school workshops (*ibidem*, p. 200).

The concern is also raised by the fact that the matriculation exam obtained by graduates of the second-degree vocational school will not be equivalent to the matriculation exam obtained by graduates of the 5-year technical school. As the Ministry of National Education justifies: “The vocational school is intended for that part of the youth who, in principle, does not plan to undertake higher education studies. The entire philosophy of the vocational school is to provide good vocational preparation for mid-level technical staff and lower-level workers”. Moreover, it is explicitly stated: “The analysis of labour market needs and student needs indicates that there is no basis for repeating the general education program in vocational schools”. This position is in opposition to the widely known trend that the future belongs to those countries whose economies are based on people with high creative competencies, self-governing. Thus, the so-called “vocational matriculation”¹, is introduced “through the back door”, which will close the doors to many universities for graduates of second-degree vocational schools.

As pragmatics indicates, vocational schools do not need spectacular actions, dynamic changes, and undermining the foundations of their operation. Rather, this specific area of education needs stabilization and friendly support both from central and local authorities, as well as from economic life. However, the reform introduced on September 1, 2019, does not promise peace, permanent funding sources, or steady support from economic environments. Analysing the documents introducing this reform, it is difficult to find original and sufficiently substantive solutions to positively forecast the future of vocational education. However, slogans often used by previous “reformers” are visible.

It must be mentioned that there is still an issue regarding the fact that even high scores achieved by examinees do not directly translate into the ability to secure better employment after graduating from school. Employers approach diplomas confirming vocational qualifications with great caution. This type of vocational certification has not yet settled in the socio-economic consciousness of our country. Unchanged for many years, high trust is placed in certificates obtained through craft education and passed journeyman or master exams.

It is currently difficult to assess the chances of success of the current version of the vocational education system reform. If the declarations of the authorities

¹ The position quoted in the text comes from the website of the Ministry of National Education, where speeches by the Minister of Education are published during conferences on the assumptions of vocational education reform.

again result in only a facade behind which the real problems of vocational education can hide, then once again it could be said about the reform that it took place, that the signs on schools and the proper names on school documents changed.

In summarizing this part of the considerations on vocational school in the logic of socio-economic growth, it should be recognized, in my opinion, that there was not much logic in this area, and there still is not. Anna Pogorzelska is right when, writing about the reform of vocational education, she states that analysing the assumptions of this 2017 reform, one can argue that the proposed changes are more of a correction or modernization, rather than a reform in the full sense of the word (Pogorzelska, 2019).

Analysing the situation of vocational schools in the context of socio-economic growth, one cannot overlook their connection with the labour market, especially since this market is considered an important manifestation of postmodernity, which will be referenced later in the article.

Vocational school and the labour market in postmodern conditions

For decades, vocational education has been accompanied by the motto that it must be adapted to the multi-dimensionally understood labour market. On one hand, this is a fairly obvious, common-sense postulate, and on the other hand, it is a slogan repeated by almost all participants in the public debate on the subject and forming the basis of policies related to vocational education, yet still remaining in the realm of imagination. The demands of the labour market are/should be a point of reference for education, especially vocational education. They influence its organization, content, and course. This applies to both current and future requirements in terms of qualifications and competencies. Today, one cannot only consider the current situation of the labour market, but, due to the speed and range of changes, anticipating the future in various professional fields is important. A justification for this is, among others, the fact that the amount of information doubles every 10 years, and it is likely that in 10 or 20 years, counting from the end of education, what a person learns in school will be outdated (Rosling, 2018, p. 267).

Writing about vocational education, which is significantly determined by the demands/needs of the labour market, it is essential to highlight that in Poland, the labour market, as a fully-fledged element of the economic system, emerged along with the systemic transformations in 1989 and developed with

the growth of the market economy. Over time, its significance in our country began to increase, reaching the status of almost a myth, for whose needs other social systems should be shaped, including the education system, particularly vocational education. In vocational education, the goals of education, content, forms, and methods of didactic work are largely dependent on its needs. The labour market dictates almost all contemporary strategies and even aspires to define the ideal of education and the vision of a new civilisation. This is discussed by Zygmunt Wiatrowski among others (2005, p. 228 and following). Although many years have passed since these words were written, they seem to be still largely relevant, and a telling expression of this is the educational policy in our country, where the education system is mainly oriented towards goals such as: “education for...”, primarily: for the needs of the labour market, employment, economic needs, vocational skills. What seems to be missing in all these postulates are the most sensitive and fundamental values, namely “education for human development”, “education for the needs of a civil society”.

Considering the issue of vocational education, attention must be paid to the variability of the world around us, including the world of work. As Michel Foucault writes: “The world outside the school building has become entirely different. [...] in this new world, people are to find individual solutions to the problems posed by society, rather than socially developed solutions for their private problems” (Foucault, 2000, p. 83-85). It must also be kept in mind that vocational schools are under a kind of pressure from their governing and supervisory bodies, which have excessive expectations from economic and social environments for: continuous improvement of “quality” and “efficiency”, mainly associated with the pass rate of graduates in external exams confirming vocational qualifications; obtaining immediate employment; and a quick return on investment. In a situation of increasing competitiveness in the educational market, a decreasing population of young people entering the post-primary education system, and unclear signals sent by local labour markets, schools have been faced with dilemmas such as: Should the educational process focus on a highly specialised field, or strive to shape a “mobile dilettante” able to quickly adapt to specific situations? Should the school select and profile its activities to meet the precise needs of professional groups, or consider the broad interests of individuals, care for their development and developmental possibilities? Should it be prospectively oriented and look to the future in a situation where the specificity of contemporary economic systems is the concept of “nothing for long”? Do the current economic issues, “customer orientation” or “result”, and actions aimed mainly at avoiding “losses”

and “failures” rest on ethical foundations and are subject to moral assessment, which should accompany all activities in the field of education, and finally, will such a vision of education lead to the formation of a society of frightened and uneasy people, people too afraid of their own success or failure, too frightened for their personal fate, that they lose sight of general human problems, as mentioned by Erich Fromm (2013, p. 36) among others. The dilemmas of vocational school functioning arise from the situation of the contemporary world described by terms such as “postmodernity”, “postmodernism”, or “liquid modernity”.

At this point, it is worth noting that all previous educational experiences were formulated based on a world that was stable and was supposed to remain even more stable because of it. Currently, such thinking almost paralyses any didactic activity – open to the needs of new generations. Therefore, today a teacher should not be evaluated because their students smoothly solve tests, but for how they act in the real world. It is easy to prove that the educational effort influences student attitudes more durably the more the taught patterns are practically implemented – in situations typical for them. The “rigid” adherence to the framework of a “timeless” model visible in school pragmatics, in which the best benefits in school are achieved only through acquiring knowledge imparted by the teacher, whom students are supposed to take as an example and imitate, cannot be justified in socio-economic practice. Hence, opinions about the inadequacy of what the school teaches compared to what life outside its walls demands continue to appear.

The persistence in maintaining the classroom-lesson system in schools as the dominant and solely proper approach is baffling. Z. Bauman’s observation can be brought into this context, as he writes that the “recipe for success is to ‘be oneself’, to be ‘unlike others’; it is the difference that sells best. Possessing knowledge and skills ‘required for a given position’ and already presented by those who held it before is not enough today. It is rather a weakness than an asset. Instead, there is a need for extraordinary ideas, exceptional and unprecedented, and above all, the feline ability to tread one’s own path. This type of knowledge is desired by people living in the era of liquid modernity. ‘Liquid modernity’ is a life full of uncertainty, under constant anxiety, the fear of being caught unawares, to keep up with the rapid pace of events, not to be left behind (Bauman, 2007, p. 6). In the ever-changing conditions of the labour market, workers will be forced to learn how to preserve energy and efficiency, to acquire the ability for personal development, to be competent and engaged at work during the entire, likely 50-year, professional career” (Drucker, 2009, p. 171).

Therefore, preparation for this, including in the process of vocational education, will be necessary. It is also important to prepare for lifelong learning throughout the period of professional activity. Here, the role of education is invaluable.

The term often used is also the so-called flexible capitalism. Organisations of “flexible capitalism” practice a kind of policy of “consciously generating uncertainty”. This tool, named by Pierre-Félix Bourdieu as *précarisation*, denotes actions that result in people becoming even more uncertain and vulnerable, and thus even more predictable and “manageable”. The state of uncertainty, as Bourdieu writes, “gives the future an indeterminate character and excludes all rational predictions, and above all, deprives people of that bit of faith in the future necessary to rebel” (Bauman, 2007, p. 212). Hence, life plans, professional futures, social positions, and the resulting sense of self-worth and belief in one’s own strength become uncertain and unclear. The dominant element of human life becomes constant tensions and crises, not allowing for even a moment of relaxation and peace. Therefore, dilemmas arise: How can one maintain the durability of social relations in such a situation? How to build one’s own narrative and make one’s life coherent? How to build one’s long-term goals in a constantly changing reality? Richard Sennett argues that contemporary “flexible capitalism” causes a “corrosion” of character, especially threatening those properties thanks to which a person feels a connection with others and does not doubt the durability of their “self” (Sennett, 2006, p. 52). These are significant issues because the shallowness and fragility of interpersonal relationships or the lack of trust indicate low levels of social capital.

Referencing the subject of education, it is necessary to add that previous educational experiences were formulated based on a world that was stable and was supposed to remain even more stable thanks to it. Discussing vocational training conducted in vocational schools in the context of postmodernity, one cannot overlook the fact that the job market is constantly transforming, hence changing the demands on vocational school graduates. A detailed discussion of job market requirements, both current and especially future ones, is not feasible due to the limited length of this paper. There still emerges a plethora of publications in the form of articles, reports, and also monographs discussing this issue. The author of the present deliberations has also written on this subject on numerous occasions.

In the case of future requirements – due to their contentiousness and uncertainty – there are difficulties with their precise formulation. Contemplating what awaits us, it must be emphasized that no one can determine the future. However,

we can speak with a high probability of socio-economic growth, a characteristic feature of which will be, and even already are, changes in professions. We are witnessing the disappearance of certain professions and the emergence of new ones in their place. This will be/is a consequence of the development of Industry 4.0 and Society 5.0, as well as the increasingly frequent use of artificial intelligence in various areas of life. The period of the third industrial revolution already caused this phenomenon, which will intensify in the coming years.

Discussing liquid modernity necessitates referencing the term “transitoriness” to describe the changes occurring in the world around us. “In the world of liquid modernity, the durability of things, much like the durability of human bonds, is often treated with aversion, seen as a threat” (Bauman, 2012, p. 149). Today, we increasingly expect that once acquired, things will no longer serve us for many years, or even a lifetime. Agreeing with Z. Bauman, who asserts that “the ability to last ‘forever’ no longer speaks in favour of things or human bonds. Things and bonds are meant to serve only for a specific time, and when they cease to be useful – which must eventually happen – they should be destroyed, discarded, or otherwise removed from sight. [...] Today’s consumerism is not about accumulating things but about deriving instantaneous and immediate pleasures from them. Why then should a commodity like knowledge, acquired during school or university, be an exception to this universal rule?” (Bauman, 2012, p. 151). This is a likely image, if not of the present, then certainly of the near future. Preparing for life and work in conditions of liquid modernity and transitoriness is the task of education, especially vocational education. Everything is changing, and the job market is particularly susceptible to changes. Equipping with appropriate qualifications and competencies necessary for employment in this market is the primary task of vocational education. So, what future-required preparation should a graduate receive?

Concluding this part of the discussion, one can echo Z. Bauman’s observation that “liquid life is a life full of uncertainty, experienced under conditions of constant anxiety. The most severe and persistent fears associated with such a life are the fear of being caught off guard, of keeping up with the swift pace of events, of being left behind, of missing the ‘expiry date’, of burdening oneself with owning something that no longer arouses the desire to possess, of missing the moment to change tactics, and of crossing a line beyond which there is no return. Liquid life consists of a series of ‘new openings’ and ‘new beginnings’ [...]. Among the skills needed to practice the art of living in conditions of liquid modernity, the ability to get rid of things is more important than the ability

to acquire them” (Bauman, 2007, p. 6). Referring to the concept of transitoriness, A. Toffler emphasised the need to become accustomed to this concept in relation to everything that surrounds us (Toffler, 1988, p. 35). The present has the character of transitoriness. The effects of changes in vocational education will become clear in time.

Conclusions

To conclude, we can refer to the words of the well-known Italian thinker Tiziano Terzani, who critically observed that today’s schools are not created to teach children to think but to teach them how to survive; they teach them what will later enable them to find a job. “Leaving such a school, you are conditioned. You repeat predetermined patterns. Coming up with anything on your own does not come easily. A person is completely subordinated to the economy” (Terzani, 2017, p. 493). The author’s further suggestion relates to universal issues: “[...] all experiments, modern societies should not be judged solely based on economic efficiency but on the type of human being they produce and the kind of life they dictate” (Terzani, 2017, p. 493).

Preparing for life and work in the conditions of liquid modernity and transitoriness is the task of education, including vocational education. Everything is changing, and the labour market is particularly susceptible to changes. Equipping with appropriate qualifications and competencies necessary for employment in this market is the primary task of vocational education. The question is, can vocational education meet this challenge? Is it well-prepared for its realization? It is hard to say definitively. However, many indications suggest that doubts remain. It is worth recalling that according to ManpowerGroup research, in Poland, over 30% of companies still feel a shortage of workers with the right qualifications (*Niedobór talentów*, 2014). Although these data were formulated a few years ago, it can be assumed that employers are still looking for employees with qualifications and competencies adapted to the demands of the job market. This is also confirmed by the author’s current analyses.

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