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# Educational and occupational choices of secondary school students, including with special educational needs, in the context of the state of career counselling

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The present paper presents the results of a research project delivered in the first half of 2016, which consisted in empirical examination of the way secondary school and upper secondary students in Gniezno plan their educational and vocational future. For the purpose of analysing the situation of the local labour market and its prospects for the group of respondents, the author surveyed secondary school students as they indirectly affect the job market since in a few years' time, they will enter the that market. The awareness of their plans affords predictions and thus preventing job market difficulties. The respondent groups consisted of the students of secondary schools, principals of secondary schools and major local employers. This paper focuses on students with special educational needs and the issues concerning the state of vocational education and young people's professional and educational choices in the light of the correlation between their planning strategies and the current needs of the local labour market.

**KEY WORDS:** Planning the educational and professional future; Career counselling; Labour market; Young people; Vocational education; Students with special educational needs

## Educational and career choices at the time of continuous changes

Giving rise to a plethora of ambivalence and ambiguity and part of the modern life (along with uncertainty and the need to take incessant risks), the state of continuous change make individuals face numerous life- and career-affecting challenges<sup>1</sup>. Transformed starting from 1989, the Polish job market forces a wide range of individuals to take numerous actions in order adapt to the new face of the job market. The once universal forms of career paths in Poland (now a state with a stable modern economy) as it had been prior to the transformation of its political system have been turned into an array of opportunities, concerns and career risks, as evidenced by the research projects by M. Piorunek<sup>2</sup>, L. Myszkas-Strychalska<sup>3</sup> et al.<sup>4</sup>

The awareness of local labour market conditions allows us to prepare to face such changes and constantly respond to them by adjusting the educational system to the needs of the job market and employers. By nature, such activities take multiple steps and are

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<sup>1</sup> Z. Bauman, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*. Warsaw. Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warsaw 2002; Z. Bauman, *Razem osobno*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2000; Z. Bauman, *Życie na przemiał*. Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2005; U. Beck, U. *Spółczesność ryzyka. W drodze do innej nowoczesności*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw 2002; A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. „Ja” i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności*. Warsaw 2001.

<sup>2</sup> M. Piorunek, *Projektowanie przyszłości edukacyjno-zawodowej w okresie adolescencji*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2004.

<sup>3</sup> L. Myszkas-Strychalska, *Orientacje zawodowe młodzieży z zespołów szkół zawodowych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2016.

<sup>4</sup> J. Kozielska, *Perspektywy i nowe rozwiązania w doradztwie zawodowym. Coaching jako narzędzie pracy doradców zawodowych w kontekście idei lifelong learningu*, *Studia Edukacyjne* No. 37, Poznań 2015; J. Kozielska, *Adaptational difficulties of Polish economic emigrants in the context of globalisation processes* *Culture – Society – Education* No. 1(11), Poznań 2017; A. Suchorab, *Wpływ zadań z zakresu orientacji i poradnictwa zawodowego realizowanych w szkole ponadgimnazjalnej na wybory edukacyjno-zawodowe studentów*, *Szkoła – Zawód – Praca*, 2012, No. 3; A. Suchorab, *Plany edukacyjno-zawodowe i zatrudnieniowe uczniów szkół zawodowych*, *Szkoła – Zawód – Praca*, 2015, No. 10.

time-intensive. However, they can help reduce many social problems such as unemployment and poverty. It also takes competent career counsellors to put this idea into practice.

The present paper provides an overview of the author's empirical verification of the process of planning educational and career futures as done by secondary and upper secondary school students of the Poviát of Gniezno. As part of examining the local job market and its perspectives, the survey groups included, among others, secondary school students with special educational needs (SEN). It is them who will enter the job market in just a few years' time and are now indirectly impacting its state. The awareness of their plans may allow us to predict and prevent situations that cause difficulties in the labour market. Some of the survey respondents were also upper secondary school students, the principals of post-secondary schools and major local employers. The project comprised four modules: I – Employer; I – Secondary school student; III – Upper secondary school student/graduate; IV – Principal of the high school<sup>5</sup>. Within this paper, I wish to focus primarily on junior

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<sup>5</sup> I. What are the educational and career plans of secondary school students of the Poviát of Gniezno, including with SEN? II. What is the local labour market situation like? III. What is the role of a secondary school career counsellor in choosing subsequent educational stage?

“PANEL: SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS”: 1. What is the social structure of secondary school students of the Poviát of Gniezno? (gender, place of residence, parents' education, average grades) 2. What are secondary school students' educational and career plans? Including SEN students? (Are they going to pursue further education? What kind of schools are they going to pick to pursue further education? What kind of programmes are they going to pick? What kind of career have they picked? Do secondary school students consider studying in other cities? What do they know and think about the professions in short supply within their region? 3. What is their opinion on professional advice at their schools? (Are they familiar with the range of educational opportunities in Gniezno? Whose assistance do they use in choosing a school? What criteria are crucial to their choosing a given school? What associations do they have with specific types of schools? What is their opinion on individual secondary schools in Gniezno? What are their definitions of “a good job”?

“PANEL: PROFESSIONALS” A STUDENT/GRADUATE OF AN UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL 1. What is the social structure of students in terms of gender

secondary school students, including those with special educational needs.

The sample was selected at random due to the specific research subject<sup>6</sup>. The survey covered secondary school students (N = 486), of which 17% were SEN students (students with disabilities, or at risk of social maladjustment, or socially maladjusted students, or students without SEN certificates, without opinions from Psychological and Pedagogical Counselling Centres, for whom the school delivers

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and careers. 2. Do students feel prepared to begin professional careers matching their current field of training? 3. What are their greatest concerns when it comes to moving from the role of a student to a role of the employee? 4. Would they like to attend an internship, job placement or a course (free of charge) that would complement their professional skills and help them fare better in the job market? 5. What training sessions or courses would the respondents use? 6. Does the school have a career counsellor? 7. Would the respondents like to use a training course on writing job application documents (CVs, motivational letters) to prepare to seek employment? 8. Would the respondents attend an individual meeting with a career counsellor? SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION What are the needs of schools in terms of equipment/extra equipment? 2. What courses/training sessions would be useful to the vocational training teachers? 3. What courses/training sessions could be offered to the "final year" students to prepare them to enter the job market in an optimum way?

EMPLOYER A 1. What is the professional field represented by the respondent? 2. What equipment/machines/devices is/are used by professionals hired by businesses? 3. What is the number of staff members working in the business (administration/professionals)? 4. How does the employer describe the job situation in the Poviát of Gniezno? 5. Are the respondents going to hire any new staff members anytime soon? (within the coming 3 years) 6. How many people are they going to hire? 7. What positions/professional fields do they want to fill? 8. How are the business seeking/has sought staff members? 9. What is the respondents' opinion on the quality of vocational training among graduates of vocational schools? 10. What is the respondents' opinion on the quality of vocational training among graduates of technical high schools? 11. What knowledge and skills should a respondent's prospective staff member possess? 12. What training sessions/courses/internships should graduates or the students have completed while in training in order to perform their professional duties in a professional way in their new workplace? 13. What is the scope of the business's cooperation with vocational schools?

<sup>6</sup> E. Babbie, *Badania społeczne w praktyce*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2005.

aid, sociotherapeutic, therapeutic, talent-development and other measures), upper secondary school students (N = 503), the principals of upper secondary schools (N = 6) and major job providers of the Poviát of Gniezno (N = 14) as well as career counsellors (N = 22).

The primary method employed within the project was that of diagnostic survey. A technique that finely fits the diagnostic survey method are survey questionnaires, used herein as a research tool. This project has also used the content analysis method<sup>7</sup>, with the content being traditional local press, both print and digital, and thematic studies provided by the Poviát Job Agency in Gniezno and other institutions.

## **Educational and career choices made by young people**

The recurrent job market problems are not just problems of the adults, labour unions, economists and politicians. Over the past few years, they have become the crux of young people's problems. The adolescence is no longer a protective preparatory period, a moratorium of sorts; it has become a period when young people become emancipated in terms of labour market problems.

Education and work are the core elements that help individuals construct social profiles of their biographies and young people embark on diverse life paths typical of adults' lifestyles<sup>8</sup>. It is worth observing that the paradigm whereby an individual's following an available educational and vocational path warranted predictable work life in the domestic job market is no longer valid. The young people of today enter their adult lives under difficult market, social and economic conditions and face growing competitiveness and are expected to embrace career mobility and flexibility. Unsurprisingly,

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<sup>7</sup> K. Żegnałek, *Metody i techniki stosowane w badaniach pedagogicznych*, Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna Towarzystwa Wiedzy Powszechnej w Warszawie, Warsaw 2008.

<sup>8</sup> M. Piorunek, *Projektowanie przyszłości edukacyjno-zawodowej w okresie adolescencji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2004b, p. 27.

over the past several years, we have observed a dynamic growth of interest in the subject of young people's educational and career choices. This situation is manifested in numerous research papers penned by, among others: A. Bańka, S. M. Kwiatkowski, A. Cybal-Michalska, M. Piorunek, E. Solarczyk-Ambrozik, R. Parzęcki, A. Suchorab, E. Kasprzak, K. Klimkowska, A. Miś, Z. Wołk, A. Kargulowa, D. Kukła, E. Turska, I. Mandrzejewska-Smól, B. Wojtasik, A. Rajchel, J. Ambroży, D. Dziewulak, W. Duda et al, including ministerial reports and studies delivered by the Institute for Educational Research and Education Development Centre etc.

The survey among secondary students, the core part of this paper, was attended by 256 female and 230 male students (all of them final-year students), including 68 students with SEN, of which 40% were female students (27 people) and 60% were male students (41 individuals). The most active survey participants<sup>9</sup> were the students of the secondary schools in Gniezno; the commitment in filling the questionnaires from the students of other secondary schools in the Poviát of Gniezno was low, as was the case with students of 2 private secondary schools in Gniezno. The vast majority of secondary school students (68.30%) involved in the survey were city dwellers; only one in three of them lived in the countryside (31.70%). The structure of respondents' parents' education varied greatly, with more than 50% of the fathers being graduates of vocational schools and technical schools. When it comes to mothers' education, many more of them have completed higher education (26% mothers vs. 14% fathers); a considerable number of mothers have completed vocational schools (every 3<sup>rd</sup> mother). Every 5<sup>th</sup> secondary school student does not know what kind of school their parents graduated from, which is concerning. The awareness of parents' education is the first stage in career counselling, or the pre-

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<sup>9</sup> The survey questionnaire was filled in at an IT lab, in the presence of the researcher and the school's guidance counsellor; not all of the students were sure of the category they belonged in – SEN/no SEN – the SEN section was filled in by the school's guidance counsellor after the students had completed their questionnaire sections.

liminary career orientation, aimed at inspiring student's interest in career life and educational choices made by the closest people around, not only parents, but also grandparents, siblings etc.

Average grades varied greatly among the student respondents. Most of them (almost 20%) had a grading average in the winter semester 2015/2016 between 3.5 and 4.0. Almost as numerous were the groups with averages of 3.00–3.50 and 4.0–4.5 (approx. 17.00% each). Every 5<sup>th</sup> student had an average of 4.50–5.00.

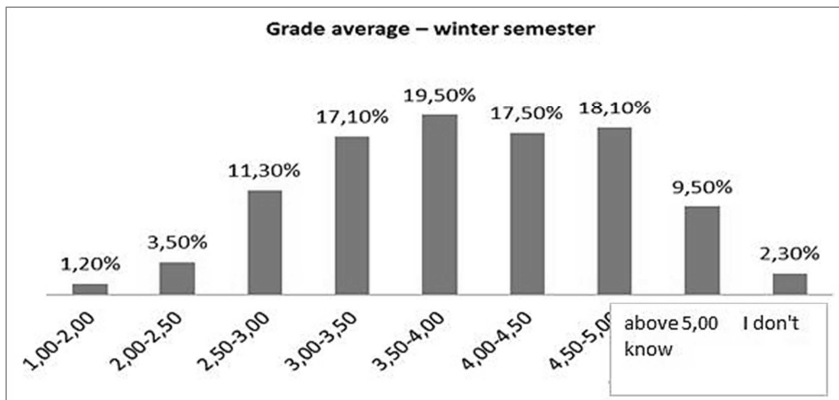


Fig. 1. Respondents' grading average

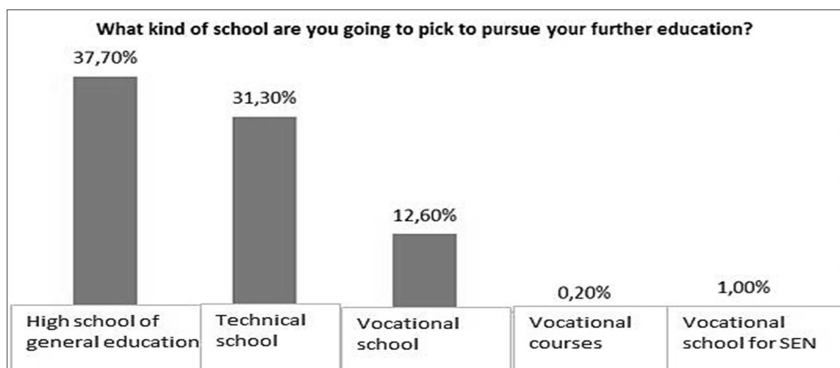
Source: Author's own research

15 individuals did not know where they would continue their education or did not intend to pursue further education, and close to 97% of respondents of the research sample were going to pursue further education. The category of special educational needs did not translate into the results. The secondary school students' had their plans primarily defined (figure 2). More than 50% of them stated that they were familiar with the range of educational and career opportunities but needed further advice on educational opportunities in the Poviát of Gniezno. Every 10<sup>th</sup> stated that they were not familiar at all

with educational and career opportunities in their city, with 37.40% saying that they were fully aware of the range of available educational and career opportunities. Interestingly enough, even the ones unfamiliar with the range of opportunities said that they have already chosen their prospective schools. The survey in question had been conducted half a year ago, before the students actually got the opportunity to pick their next schools. The comparison of the February survey and the data of the Poviát Administrative Bureau of Gniezno with the actual admission data (July) revealed that survey declarations reflected the actual choices made by secondary school graduates (43% of the graduates chose to continue at high schools of general education; 37% went to technical schools, and every 5<sup>th</sup> picked a vocational school). February declarations (figure 2) prompted Poviát authorities to reduce their admission quotas. Aware of the specific nature of the poviát job market and the fate of those graduating from high school of general education, a campaign entitled *Zawódówka jest OK* was held (*Vocational schools are OK*), which resulted in a higher number of secondary school graduates admitted into technical and vocational schools in the 2016/2017 admission season.

The February declarations showed that almost 40% of secondary school graduates planned to pick a high school of general education, with every 10<sup>th</sup> of them not knowing yet what type of programme they would pursue (the most popular were the humanities and defence programmes). Every third wanted to continue their education at a technical school, and only every 10<sup>th</sup>, at a vocational school. Educational and career choices among students with SEN were similar; however, more of them said they would pick technical and vocational schools rather than high schools of general education. 22% of them eventually picked vocational schools and just as many did high schools of general education, and every 2<sup>nd</sup> student would select a technical school (56%). The vast majority of those picking the more vocationally oriented schools (technical and vocational schools) were boys. Only 5% of them were girls (their share in the group of SEN students was higher – every 6<sup>th</sup> female chose vocational and technical schools).





**Fig. 2.** Educational plans of secondary school students of the Poviato of Gniezno

Source: author's study

School choices are unrelated to respondents' parents' education; they do not reproduce their parents' life scripts or educational models; however, we can see that the respondents who pick high schools of general education wanted to eventually go to universities want to achieve a level of education higher than their parents did. Importantly, the students pick high schools of general education regardless of their grading average, which means that very good and very bad students equally often pick high schools of general education, which ends with A levels (technical and high schools of general education were picked by 78% students with SEN).

The students (with or without SEN) declaring they were going to continue their education in vocational and technical schools much more frequently (72%) were able to describe and name the profession of their choice, but some students picked professions for which training was not available at the schools they picked, e. g. psychologist, therapist, doctor, teacher, physician, lawyer, sports commentator etc. Additionally, the vast majority of them (64%) could not specify the skills needed to pursue the career they chose. Over 62% of the students could not point to professions sought after by the job market, even the local job market. They basically make their decisions haphazardly.

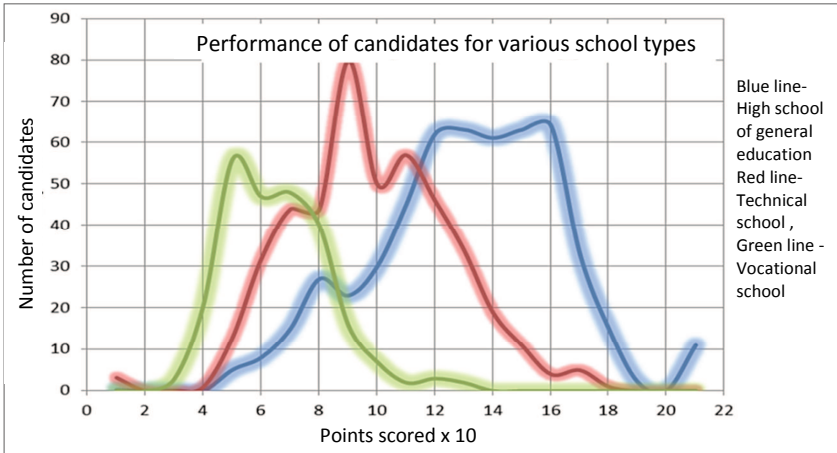


Fig. 3. Results of *gimnazjum* leaving exams (blue line-High school of general education red - Technical school, green - Vocational school)

Source: Author's own compilation based on the Poviata Administrative Bureau of Gniezno

The dilemmas related to career choices are connected to the fact that career counsellors' presence is poorly visible at the schools. The students claiming that the school has a career counsellor are as numerous as the number of students who say the schools have none or that they do not know if there are any. The students with SEN fared slightly better in this case - at 4 out of 13 schools who took part in the survey, SEN students attended meetings with career counsellors as part of the extra time provided by the principal). 67% of them knew that the school had a career counsellor. The statutory obligation and the inquiry into the schools taking part in the survey shows that all of the surveyed schools have an individual delivering career counselling activities (although their presence is often hardly visible) and activities defined under the School Career Counselling System. The low recognition of the role of the career counsellor is related to the fact that career counselling/career orientation activities are delivered incidentally, are not schedule-based and, in many cases, are delivered in the event of a teacher's absence. Furthermore, the con-

tent of the counselling meetings is not unequivocally recognized by the students as career counselling as such. For example, self-awareness classes provided by a career counsellor who is also guidance counsellor or teaches another subject, might have been thought of by the students as classes with the school's guidance counsellor rather than a dedicated career counsellor.

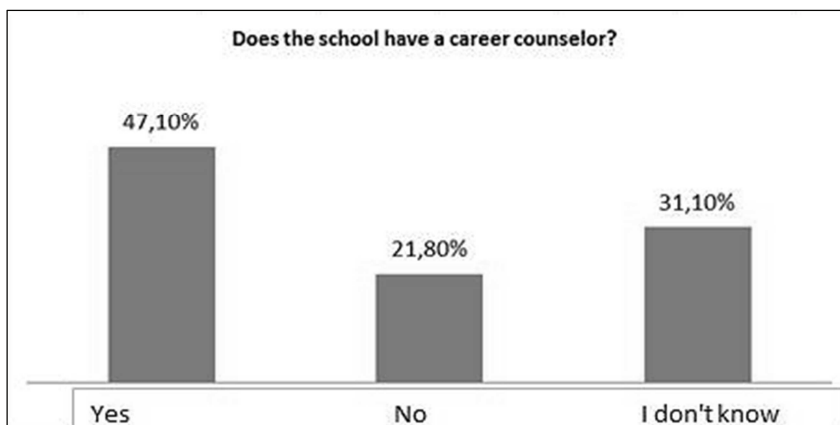


Fig. 4. Career counsellors at secondary schools

Source: author's study

Alarmingly, the vast majority of students (without SEN) (68%) point out that they have not used career counsellor's assistance and have not attended any career counselling classes. Almost 70% of the respondents (with or without SEN) declare they use some assistance in making their choice about their future schools and careers; 30% claim they are fully aware of this aspect. The significant ones contributing to their educational choices are mostly their parents (78.60%), followed by the Internet (31.30%), friends (28.40%) and other family members (25.50%), siblings (24.30%), career counsellors (17.50%), teachers (11.50%) and supervising teachers (8%). This part of the research project shows that parents play a significant role in

career counselling, which is why career counsellors should also work with them; after all it is them that young people ask for support. The parents might not be competent in providing career counselling; they might be ignorant of the career counsellor working at the school. If so, they will not refer their children to a career counsellor. Therefore, it is worth offering lectures and workshops for parents on how to assist children with their career choices.

Young people claim that their choices of schools are based on their interests, the fact that a given school will let them pursue a specific career and have a good position in the job market and the fact that they will be able to go to a university. As many researchers point out in their papers, the choice of a high school of general education followed by university studies is the response to the hard times and a way of postponing the decision about one's career<sup>10</sup>. Over 80% of the respondents declare that they choose a given school because it fits their interests (interestingly, almost 50% could not specify their interests and what they are good at). Almost half of the respondents say that what was decisive in their school choice was the fact that, upon graduating from the school, they could secure a decent job or go on to attend a university. Nearly every 5<sup>th</sup> respondent (with or without SEN) picked a given school because it was "nice" or the fact that it was close to their neighbourhood (21.80%). Almost half of the respondents could not explain which of the local vocational and technical schools and high school of general education they thought was best. Every 10<sup>th</sup> respondent was guided

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<sup>10</sup> M. Piorunek, *Projektowanie przyszłości edukacyjno-zawodowej w okresie adolescencji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2004; J. Kozielska, *Perspektywy i nowe rozwiązania w doradztwie zawodowym. Coaching jako narzędzie pracy doradców zawodowych w kontekście idei lifelong learningu*, Studia Edukacyjne No. 37, 2015, Poznań 2015; J. Kozielska, *Adaptational difficulties of Polish economic emigrants in the context of globalisation processes Culture – Society – Education* No. 1(11), 2017 Poznań; A. Suchorab, *Wpływ zadań z zakresu orientacji i poradnictwa zawodowego realizowanych w szkole ponadgimnazjalnej na wybory edukacyjno-zawodowe studentów*, *Szkoła – Zawód – Praca*, 2012, No. 3; A. Suchorab, *Plany edukacyjno-zawodowe i zatrudnieniowe uczniów szkół zawodowych*, *Szkoła – Zawód – Praca*, 2015, No. 10.

by the fact that their friends were interested in a given school or they were already attending it, and every 20<sup>th</sup> person was convinced by their parents to make a given choice.

Secondary school students made their choices, as they put it themselves, "at random", without knowing the needs of the local job market, let alone regional and nationwide job markets. The list of industries identified as the ones with the largest growth potential and/or strategic industries for the Region of Wielkopolska and the rank of occupations and specialties lists 44 occupations in short supply. The vast majority of them are ones that require vocational or technical school background (24 occupations). The occupations identified as being in short supply within the Poviát of Gniezno are: administrators of computer systems; analysts, testers and IT system operators; concrete placers and steel fixers; car sheet metal workers; construction carpenters and joiners; financial and investment advisors; electrical mechanics and electricians; hairdressers; graphic designers; plumbers; mechanical engineers; waiters and bartenders; tractor drivers; construction site managers; EU project coordinators; tailors and clothing workers; cooks; car painters; doctors; building painters; machine and equipment mechanics; motor vehicle mechanics; plumbers/gas/HVAC fitters; masons; vocational training teachers; teachers of vocational subjects; boot makers; caregivers for the elderly or disabled persons; nurses; kitchen aids; floor layers; accounting and book-keeping staff; database designers and administrators; sales representatives; construction workers; wood workers and carpenters; farmers and breeders; chartered accountants; MIG/MAG welders; TIG welders; automation and robotics professionals; organization of production professionals; real estate market professionals; IT implementation professionals; chefs; upholsterers; electrical technicians; mechanical technicians; and plasterers. The vast majority of the occupations identified as being in short supply are occupations that require vocational or technical schooling. Thus, the choices made by the SEN students seem to fit in the nature of the local and regional job markets better.

## **Career counsellors and students with SEN**

The state of career counselling is far from fine. Career counsellors in the Poviát of Gniezno (N-22) were asked if their schools had any SEN students. The vast majority said 'yes' (97%). Surprisingly, only 6 of them were members of the bodies responsible for the management of psychological and counselling support, thus at the organizational level, few of them contribute towards the counselling agenda. This is baffling as the activities related to career choices and planning students' ensuing education and training are some of the many kinds of psychological and counselling help. The nature of a career counsellor's work with individuals with, for instance, disabilities, should rest on the conviction that career life is a form of rehabilitation as individuals need to secure job, keep it and get promoted. It is an opportunity for them to be part of the community. Taking up a random or inappropriate career decision comes with serious consequences for those with disabilities. They are at risk of making futile efforts to gain vocational qualifications, which then do not result in them embarking on their careers. As a result, they might grow frustrated and give up on further occupational rehabilitation and professional life. Only 54% of career counsellors in the group in question have formal education, 8% were able to indicate more than 10 professions listed as being in short supply, and 94% of them rely on tests, although none of them had any psychometric training or valid certificates.

### **"A life and career project – a random project"**

The strategies aimed at planning one's future make a vast theoretical domain. In a specific way, the strategies connect the realm of designing individual stages of one's educational and professional path to how these stages translate into social practice, i.e. the verification of preparatory assumptions in the course of the actions an

individual undertakes"<sup>11</sup>. The strategies mentioned by M. Piorunek are as follows:

- Condensation strategy ('narrowing the field of vision');
- Additive strategy ('solving the jigsaw puzzle');
- Stochastic strategy ('choosing at random' or 'relying on others');
- The currency strategy, which might consist in postponing decisions ("we will sort it out as the time comes") or a passive strategy, the motto of which is "I don't see perspectives for myself";
- Security strategy ("a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush").

The first of the strategies, the condensation strategy, consists in a highly defined educational orientation and early crystallization of essential outlines of one's professional orientation (...). This situation is more often the case with those who are highly successful educationally and have high educational ambition<sup>12</sup>. Another strategy, the additive strategy, is a manifestation of "mature educational orientation and fluid, unstable career orientation (...). For instance, an individual might clearly aspire to complete higher education, but they are not quite sure about a specific field. As they progress through their education, they come up with ever-new career ideas (...)"<sup>13</sup>. The stochastic strategy is one that is the result of 'vague' educational and career orientation (...). It applies to people who struggle to make a decision on their career"<sup>14</sup>. The security strategy is manifested by "a comparably mature career orientation, later on validated by the progressing educational orientation. In this case, the eventual decisions are made with respect of the biographical dimensions marked by the comparably lowest risk of failure"<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> M. Piorunek, *Projektowanie przyszłości edukacyjno-zawodowej w okresie adolescencji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2004b, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> M. Piorunek, *Projektowanie przyszłości edukacyjno-zawodowej w okresie adolescencji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2004b, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> M. Piorunek, *Projektowanie przyszłości edukacyjno-zawodowej w okresie adolescencji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2004b, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> M. Piorunek, *Projektowanie przyszłości edukacyjno-zawodowej w okresie adolescencji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2004b, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> M. Piorunek, *Projektowanie przyszłości edukacyjno-zawodowej w okresie adolescencji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2004b, p. 60.

## Summary

In the light of the following research problems of this project: I. What are the educational and career plans of secondary school students of the Poviát of Gniezno, including with SEN? II. What is the local labour market situation like? III. What is the role of the secondary school career counsellor in choosing subsequent educational stage? we may arguably conclude that the vast majority of the respondents are going to continue their education at high schools of generational education, with SEN students pointing to technical and vocational schools more frequently than their schoolmates without SEN. Educational choices and, resultantly, career choices among secondary school students of the survey group, including SEN students, seem to rest on the stochastic and security strategies. In planning their future, young people seem to rely on others' opinions and current trends (annual high school ranks; when it comes to the popularity of vocations, the 3 most prevalent were: an economist, a hairdresser, construction industry and mechanics/mechatronics careers, the usual choices among secondary school students over the past few years), which unfortunately do not fit in the local, or regional, job market, which makes it hard to optimize the trends even within the local dimension. They make their decisions without knowing the range of available educational opportunities, without self-knowledge (strength, weaknesses and interests) and without knowing the nature of the regional and the local job markets. What is not quite optimistic in this light is the state of career counselling, with over half of career counsellors having no formal training and real impact on the frequency and the programme of vocational guidance activities. Unsurprisingly, the parents play a decisive role in helping their children choose their occupation. SEN students' educational and vocational choices seem to fit in the needs of the job market better. Is it the result of career counselling, which is delivered to those students most frequently, or the result of the stereotype saying that "challenged students/graduates make for perfect candidates for vocational schools", which the respondents, i.e. sec-



ondary school students, view as the schools for the weaker and less ambitious ones. This is a highly misguided view since, as observed by S.M. Kwiatkowski, vocational and technical education is full of challenges and is difficult and demanding – the students need to study Polish, maths and numerous vocational subjects and do internships.

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