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## Vocational school is (not) OK? Vocational school in middle school students' opinions vs. educational-vocational choices with regard to the situation on the labour market

**Key words:** Planning of the future of vocational education, vocational counselling, labour market, youth, vocational education

**Abstract:** The proposed text is an illustration of selected conclusions from a four-module research project conducted in one of the Wielkopolska counties (Gniezno County). The aim of the empirical verification was to make a description of educational and professional plans of middle-school students from the Gniezno County, to become acquainted with employers' opinions on the situation in the local labor market, to become acquainted with employment plans, to become familiar with opinions on the preparation of graduates of particular types of schools (vocational schools), to become familiar with opinions of principals of secondary schools on the state of vocational education and to become familiar with opinions of students of last secondary school grades on the situation on the labour market, the offer of vocational education and the self-assessment of the preparation to enter the labour market. The research was conducted in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 2016 and 2017 using the diagnostic survey method (after the year-long campaign "Vocational School is OK"). The paper is based on one of the study modules – a study of middle school students that was conducted in 2016 – the findings from the 2017 study will be cited in some places for comparative purposes only. Due to specific characteristics of the research topic, the selection of the research sample was random. Middle school students (N = 486 in 2016 and N = 490 in 2017), secondary school students (N = 503 – 2016 and N = 498 – 2017), secondary school principals (N = 6 in 2016 and 2017) and the biggest employers from the Gniezno County (N = 78 in 2016, N = 102 in 2017). This project was carried out on the basis of

the diagnostic survey method.. The content analysis method was used, involving the local traditional (printed) and internet press and the thematic work edited by the County Labour Office in Gniezno and other institutions.

This paper deals with educational and vocational choices of middle school students in the context of the situation on the local labour market (which, as it turns out, do not correspond to its needs), at the same time revealing in the shortcomings of vocational counselling. With regard to the specific nature of the region, attention has also been paid to the perception of vocational education, which is evaluated negatively by the middle school student community, even though its offer turns to be rich. However, in the reality of the local labour market, vocational school seems to be a rational educational choice that does not block access to higher education. The reflections on vocational education constitute an additional element of the publication.

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## Educational choices of young people

Specific and constantly changing conditions of social-cultural space resulted in the “prolongation of the period of preparation for participation in the community of adults (moratorium – no longer a child, but not an adult yet)” (Krzychała, 2007, p. 8); this, in turn, gave rise to a “new phase of life and new social space” and this is how the “phenomenon of youth was born” (Krzychała, 2007, p. 8). This category of persons is at the stage of development that involves making decisions about their own future. It is worth stressing that the “formation of partner and family relationships and the modelling of social-vocational career is currently an open task for the entire life that is constantly modified and redefined. It is an obvious, even trivial statement for us – the participants of the society of lifelong learners. Learning and work are essential elements through which the social profile of the biography is built and young people enter various tracks of vocational life that characterise paths of life of adults” (Piorunek, 2004b, p. 27).

Below you will find conclusions from surveys where respondents were young inhabitants of the Gniezno County.

In the survey of the last grades of middle-school students (256 K, 230 M) (2016), the most active group consisted of students from middle schools in Gniezno; among

the rest of middle school students from the county, few filled the survey questionnaire. Consequently, the vast majority of middle school students (68.30%) participating in the survey live in the city; only every third student lives in the countryside (31.70%). The structure of education of parents – respondents is very diverse; nearly 60% (57.60%) of fathers are graduates of basic vocational schools and technical schools; 16% of fathers completed higher education. As regards the education of mothers, the group of basic vocational school graduates is also large (every third mother). However, nearly 10% more mothers than fathers (25.00%) completed higher education. We should be alarmed by the fact that every 5<sup>th</sup> middle school student does not know from which school his/her parents graduated. Knowledge about the education of parents is one of the first stages of vocational consultancy – vocational orientation, stimulation of cognitive curiosity concerning the professional life and educational choices of close relatives – not only parents, but also grandparents, siblings etc.

Students from the group of respondents obtained diversified grade averages. Most of them (almost 20%) are persons who obtained a grade average between 3.5 and 4.0 in the winter semester of the school year 2015-16; persons with an average of 3.00-3.50 and 4.0 and 4.5 form almost equal groups (around 17%). Every fifth student achieved an average of 4.50-5.00. 15 persons do not know whether they continue their education or do not intend to continue education, whereas almost 97.00% of respondents from the reported research sample intend to continue their education. Their plans were essentially specified at the time of measurement. (The survey was conducted in the last grade of middle school half a year before the end of the school year). Secondary schools of general education were the most popular choice among future middle school graduates.

Over 50.00% of students declare that they are familiar with the offer of secondary education, but they need information support with regard to the educational offer in the Gniezno County. Every tenth student says that he/she is completely unfamiliar with the educational-vocational offer in the city; 37.40% declare that they have full knowledge regarding the offer. Interestingly enough, even without knowing the offer, they declare – as presented above – that they have already chosen their future school. The presented survey was conducted half a year before the possibility of making an authentic choice of the further level of education. After the juxtaposition of surveys from February and data of the County Starost Office in Gniezno (N=1216 all middle school students of the county) with recruitment data (July), it turned out that (forecasted) choices (being the subject-matter of the project in question) overlapped (in terms of popularity of particular types of schools) with actual choices of graduates of middle schools. 43.00% of students decided to learn in secondary school of general education, 37% of middle school

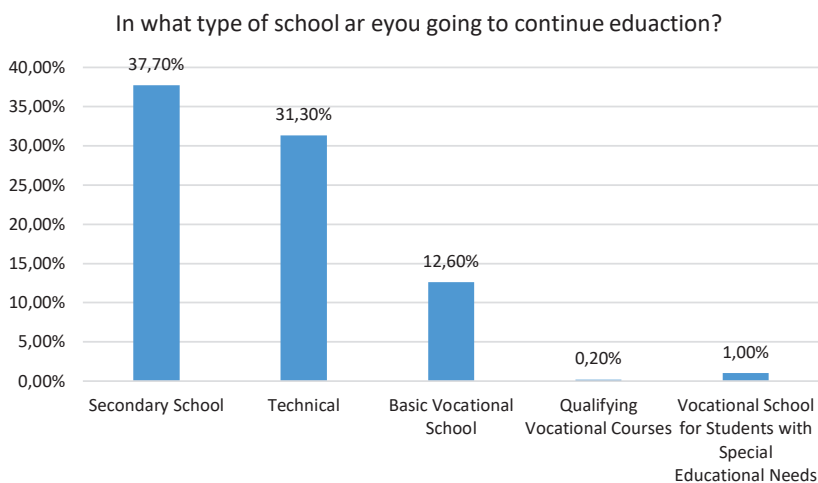


Chart 1. Students' educational plans

Source: Own work.

graduates chose technical schools, whereas 20.00% of students chose vocational schools. However, as a result of declarations made in February, the authorities of the county reduced the number of divisions in secondary schools of general education. In declarations from February, nearly 40.00% of middle school students planned to choose secondary school of general education, although every 10<sup>th</sup> student had not decided yet in which type of class he wanted to learn (the remaining respondents chose arts classes and defence classes most frequently). Every third respondent intended to continue his/her education in technical school, and only every 10<sup>th</sup> respondent wanted to attend basic vocational school. It is worth noting that middle school students decide to learn in secondary school of general education irrespective of their average grades. This is confirmed by data presented above, which exemplify results of middle school tests with regard to the secondary school to which middle school graduate has been admitted.

A vast majority of students who declare that they will continue education in vocational schools and technical schools were able to identify and name the profession they chose (72.00%), but some of them (38.00%) indicated professions that cannot be learned in the aforementioned schools, e.g., psychologist, therapist, doctor, teacher, criminologist, lawyer, sports commentator, etc. Moreover, most of those who chose basic vocational school (64%) were unable to indicate what predispositions are necessary to practice the profession chosen by them. In addition, over 62.00% of students were unable to indicate the professions for which there is demand on the labour market (at least the local one). This means that they

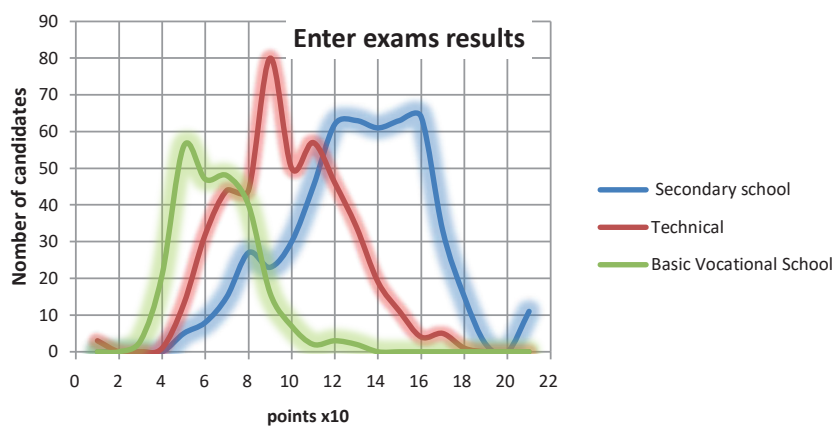


Chart 2. Results of middle school examinations

Source: Own work on the basis of data of the County Starost Office in Gniezno

made basically random decisions. After one year of duration of the program “Vocational School is OK”, whose beneficiaries were parents and students and under which career advisers and employers promoted vocational education, the trend was reversed and 42.50% of students declared they would choose technical school, 37.50% opted for secondary school of general education and 20.00% would choose 1<sup>st</sup> degree vocational school. The researcher of post-accession economic migrations was surprised by the low level of declarations of mobility for education or employment purposes in the research group. 88.00% of middle school students declared their will to learn “on the spot”; in the case of respondents, this meant learning in Gniezno, and only every 10<sup>th</sup> student considers the possibility of moving to another city (e.g., Poznań, which is 50 km away and has a broader educational offer).

## Specific characteristics of the local labour market

Middle school students made their decisions at random – as they declared, they did so without knowing the needs of the local and regional (not to mention nationwide) labour market and their predispositions and professional interests. This exposes once again the poor condition of career counselling – its first module refers to becoming familiar with oneself, whereas the second refers to the knowledge of the local/regional educational offer and specific characteristics of the local/regional labour market.

The list of industries identified as industries with biggest development potential and/or industries of strategic importance for the Wielkopolska Province and the barometer of professions and specialisations indicate 44 shortage professions

on the regional level. Most of them are the professions that require the completion of vocational education (24 professions). The list of shortage professions in the Gniezno County and, more broadly, the region includes, e.g., computer system administrators; analysts, testers and operators of ICT systems; concreters and steel fixers; car sheet metal workers; building carpenters and woodworkers; building roofers and sheet metal workers; financial and investment advisers; electromechanical engineers and installation electricians; hairdressers and barbers; computer graphic designers; plumbers; mechanical engineers; waiters and bartenders; truck tractor drivers; tailors and clothes production employees; cooks; car sprayers; building painters; machine and equipment mechanics; motor vehicle mechanics; building system fitters; bricklayers; vocational training teachers; footwear makers; caregivers for elderly or disabled persons; nurses; kitchen assistants; floor layers; accounting and bookkeeping employees; building workers; wood processing workers and woodworkers; farmers and breeders; independent accountants; MIG/MAG method welders; TIG method welders; automation and robotics specialists; production organisation specialists; chefs; upholsterers; electric technicians; mechanical technicians; plasterers. The vast majority of shortage professions are those taught in basic vocational schools and technical schools. Local employers declare that employees most frequently sought by them are graduates of technical schools (100.00%), basic vocational schools (60.00%) and universities of technology (40.00%); as many as 80.00% of employees declare that, in spite of their numerous efforts (job offers on the Internet, in the local press and media; internal recruitments; co-operation with the labour office, employment agencies and schools), they find it very hard to find an employee whose professional profile would correspond to the company's needs.

### **Lowered perception of vocational education**

Because of its lowered perception, vocational education is not popular among young people; the choice of vocational school is a negative choice that is often preceded by school failures.

Associations concerning technical schools are more favourable. Middle school students associate technical schools with the fact that they will acquire the profession and take secondary school final examinations; young people stress: 'we can, but don't have to undertake studies, because we already have vocational education,' 'you can take final examinations and the title of technician is yours,' 'it is good when you want to acquire both the profession and higher education,' 'I can

study and I'm oriented towards a specific profession.' The biggest number of pejorative associations concerned basic vocational schools; respondents think that this school is for persons with low ambitions and after graduation it is very difficult to find a job or only low-paid work is available.

These beliefs are exemplified by respondents' answers: 'I have negative connotations with vocational school – parents have always warned me against it, or even threatened that if I didn't study hard, I would go there and have a hard life' (K/2016/12). 'Vocational school is only for blockheads who achieve the worst results, because it is on the lowest level and they can cope only there ...' (K/2016/77). 'I've always known that I would choose general secondary school and studies; I've never thought of vocational school, when I go by bus, I see boys from there who do the cleaning work in these blue uniforms; I wouldn't like to do this; I prefer learning to working at an early age ... I will have a better job and more money after studies' (K/2016/16). 'Vocational school is for worse students who do not cope; later they find it hard to find a job and earn little ...' (M/2016/23). 'I associate vocational school with hard work, dirt behind nails and drunken guys on the building site; I prefer secondary school, it guarantees a better future' (K/2016/107). 'I don't think much of vocational school; you can't find a good job after it, and today you have to learn and study to find work' (M/2016/65). 'I associate vocational school with the weakest students who would not cope anywhere else; I perceive it as a place for boys rather than girls that involves uninteresting jobs, hard manual work on building sites and dirty uniforms...' (K/2016/54). 'It's a school for lazy and illiterate persons; some of my classmates are like this; they're up to no good, vocational school is the only suitable place, if any, for them' (K/2016/17). 'I would be ashamed of going there; it's well-known that this school is for the worst students' (K/2016/54).

There were only few positive opinions concerning the fact that vocational school helps to acquire a certain profession and its graduates can start work immediately. 'Vocational schools are not that bad; I have a friend who is young and already runs her own hairdresser's salon and is very successful; her friends learn and have nothing, and she does a great job and makes a good living; she can afford everything and is independent ...' (K/2016/77). 'It's a fine place because you can immediately get a job and earn your own money; and, after all, you can continue education at the same time,' (M/2016/76). 'These schools are good for those who have a family business, for example, I have a friend whose parents run a patisserie, so he is going to learn there (in vocational school) in order to take this business over from his parents' (M/2016/12). 'My mother is a vocational school graduate and has her own tailoring shop; she never complains, she says that she does what

she likes, she works for herself, so I think it is a fine thing, and my father works in a warehouse; he works hard, but he says that he would find it even harder to get accustomed to clerical work; he graduated from vocational school, too, and he says that this school gave him a lesson of life ...' (M/2016/34).

As mentioned above, vocational school is associated with poor students; S. Kwiatkowski points out that vocational school is difficult, and its students gain not only theoretical, but also practical knowledge. (cf. S. Kwiatkowski, 2001)

As can be seen, the labour market of the Gniezno County is characterised by a shortage of specialists in industries for which vocational and technical schools educate their students. For the last few years, the educational offer of secondary schools has been invariably inadequate (even though it is very rich) to the personnel needs of employers; an analysis of the educational offer of schools allows us to state that education in almost 60 professions is available in the county, including all shortage professions identified above. However, conclusions from employers' studies show that professions (e.g., a welder or an automation fitter) often fits the category of a shortage profession (literally), but, because of obsolete education technologies, the graduate fails to match the profile of the candidate being sought. Moreover, employers use latest technologies in their work; according to declarations of school principals in their studies, such technologies are absent in their schools. In connection with the above, teachers are also incompetent in respect of modern technologies. Engaging practical training teachers is a very serious problem. Underfinanced vocational education results in a decrease of the quality of learning. 80% of employers participating in surveys stated that employees are available, but it is impossible to find a candidate with relevant education and qualifications; they declare that things would improve after the implementation of an adequate education system considering market needs, a programme of internships improving the competence of the future graduate, a programme of additional training courses, the delivery of equipment analogous to employers' equipment to school workshops, a job fair, lectures in schools, the improvement of the significance and modernisation of vocational education – schools should be provided with equipment used in the given workplace so that the graduate could be fully prepared for work immediately upon completion of education and internships. None of the employers reported the lack of difficulty in finding an employee.

In enterprises covered by the study, the biggest group of employees comprises employees with basic vocational and secondary vocational education. Such results mean that mainly persons having specific vocational qualifications and competences stand a higher chance of employment on the local market in the Gniezno



County. Obviously, graduates can migrate to other cities in search of employment; however, it must be stressed that respondents forming the research group do not declare the will to migrate.

## Summary

Educational and vocational choices of middle school students from the group in question seem to be based on the stochastic strategy and the safety strategy. In terms of planning their educational & vocational future, young people seem to rely on others' opinions and current trends that are not compatible with the needs of the local labour market, which means that the optimisation of trends at least in the local environment becomes a challenge. Middle school students more often decide to continue education in secondary schools of general education than in vocational schools. This may be a consequence of the lowered perception of vocational schools. Schools that, in respondents' opinions, should be avoided. The hardly visible activity of career advisers does not improve things, either. What forms, therefore, is a vicious circle: negatively perceived vocational school and educational & vocational choices focusing on secondary schools of general education. In addition, it is necessary to take into account local employers who permanently seek personnel (in professions taught in vocational schools). The situation of the county is not an isolated case; it is a part of the nationwide situation presented, for example, in the report *A Shortage of Talents* – a cyclic survey of ManpowerGroup aimed at determining the scale of the problem encountered by employers seeking employees for their organisations. Around 40,000 respondents from over 40 countries, including 750 from Poland, take part in the annual survey conducted by ManpowerGroup around the world since 2006 and in Poland since 2008. The respondents are persons responsible for the personnel policy in small, medium-sized and large private companies and state-owned institutions. 45% of employers in Poland report difficulties in acquiring employees. It is the highest rate in the last 6 years. In the global ranking that encompasses 43 states from around the world, Poland is classified in the first half, exceeding the global average. The most numerous vocational groups marked by the largest shortage of talents include qualified manual employees, engineers and drivers. Qualified manual workers have been invariably the vocational group whose representatives are the most difficult to find during the last few years. It includes, among others, mechanics, electricians, welders, fitters, forklift truck operators, bricklayers, printers, woodworkers or lathe-operators. The second place is occupied by drivers; immediately behind them there are engineers.

Thus, a serious challenge for the education system is to reform vocational schools (which will see in the nearest future) so that they would be perceived favourably by students having to choose school and their graduates would be prepared for work in the environment of the state-of-the-art technologies; another important issue should be to restore the high rank of vocational education.

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