

Difficulties in choosing a secondary school in the opinion of parents Trudności w wyborze szkoły ponadpodstawowej w opinii rodziców

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Abstract: The current state of knowledge indicates that the decision-making process related to the choice of a secondary school involves not only students, but also their parents whom young people perceive as their best advisors. The article presents the results of the author's own research conducted in Polish secondary schools. The research was aimed at identifying the difficulties and accompanying circumstances related to the choice of a secondary school in the opinion of parents of first-grade students at technical schools. The conducted qualitative research was based on the interview method. The research sample was N=53. The analysis of the research material was carried out using the MAXQDA 2022 program. The analysis of qualitative data allowed to identify the determinants of difficulties or lack of difficulties related to choosing a secondary school.

Keywords: vocational education, reasons for choosing a secondary school, Polish secondary school, technical school student, parents, Poland

Abstrakt: Stan wiedzy wskazuje, że w proces decyzyjny związany z wyborem szkoły ponadpodstawowej zaangażowani są nie tylko uczniowie, ale także ich rodzice postrzegani przez młodzież jako najlepsi doradcy. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badań własnych przeprowadzonych w polskich szkołach średnich, których celem było rozpoznanie trudności oraz okoliczności im towarzyszących związanych z wyborem szkoły ponadpodstawowej w opinii rodziców uczniów klas pierwszych technikum. W badaniach jakościowych wykorzystano metodę wywiadu. Próba badana wynosiła N=53. Analizę materiału badawczego przeprowadzono z wykorzystaniem programu MAXQDA 2022. Analiza danych jakościowych pozwoliła na wskazanie uwarunkowań występowania oraz braku występowania trudności związanych z wyborem szkoły ponadpodstawowej.

Słowa kluczowe: kształcenie zawodowe, motywy wyboru szkoły średniej, polska szkoła średnia, uczeń technikum, rodzice, Polska



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INTRODUCTION

When choosing a secondary school, students for the first time in their lives, have the opportunity to decide whether to continue general education in general secondary schools or vocational education in stage I sectoral vocational schools or technical secondary schools.

In this decision-making process, students can often count on the support of their parents, who commonly adopt a supportive attitude towards their children's creativity starting from their first years of their lives (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba 2013, 175). Children can manifest their creativity in various fields, i.e.,

scientific, artistic, social, but also technical (Dobrołowicz 1993, 108-110; Perleth, Sierwald and Heller 1993, 149-155). This creativity provides grounds for outstanding achievements in areas in which individuals demonstrate their specific capabilities (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius and Worrell 2015, 27). Supportive parents, regardless of their children's age, always help them in defining and achieving their goals, carefully observe the changes taking place in their children's development and demonstrate readiness to engage in a dialogue with them or intervene in difficult situations. Parents are involved in the decision-making process related to the choice of a school which is guided by the idea is that it should facilitate acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as promote children's creative self-realization (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba 2013, 183). Individuals who in their childhood demonstrate creativity in construction and technological activities, manifested, among others, by inventing machines, building new things according to their own ideas and using a variety of materials, those who show creative imagination, and maintain their interests in their teenage years, most frequently decide to choose a secondary school of a technical profile (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba 2013, 182, 185).

Although, as evidenced by the Central Statistical Office research (GUS 2013, 89), parents and grandparents account but for a small percentage of those influencing the choice of a school by young people, they still occupy a high, second place in the ranking, right after the students themselves. Children point to themselves as the main decision-makers (85,67 % percentage points – “myself” and 9.19 % percentage points – “parents, grandparents”). In most cases, parents have more or less clearly formulated views as regards the professional future of their children, but they involve them in the decision-making process in order to let them share responsibility for the choice (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba and Baum 2013, 91). Some students feel apprehensive about making their own decision regarding the choice of a secondary school because they perceive this choice as final and irrevocable and they are therefore willing to shift the responsibility for it to other people, e.g. parents (Pisula 2009, 86-87).

Important factors influencing the choice of a profession correlated with parents include: the level of parents' or older siblings' education, professional family traditions, parents' social position aspirations and the level of their knowledge about the profession proposed to the child as well as about the ways of gaining it, parents' attitude towards education and various types of professional activity, their level of

propriety, financial situation, and consideration of the child's health and physical development (Duda and Kukla 2012, 34).

When choosing a secondary school and the field of education, primary school students together with their parents can use professional help provided by a career counsellor employed at a primary school or in a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre. This position is held by people who have appropriate formal qualifications as well as a number of desirable personal characteristics (openness, kindness, empathy, communication skills, patience) conducive to establishing a positive relationship with both students and their parents, and who are able to recognize children's capabilities in order to work out an individual action plan (Olszewska-Gniadek 2021, 225, 231-232; Rozporządzenie 2019). Young people aged 15 to 24 may experience profession-related problems due to: "getting to know themselves, choosing education paths, choosing a profession, improving qualifications, looking for a job, unemployment, choosing a life partner" (Wojtasik 2011, 50). A career counsellor who tailors educational choices to children's strengths can ensure that children will pursue education in fields consistent with their capabilities (Chilewa and Osaki 2022, 180). However, as hardly anyone may know a child better than parents, it is parents who are considered the best advisors (Wojtasik 2011, 107), since they have the strongest influence on the choice of educational and professional paths by young people (Hurlock 1965, 269-270). Parents participating in the decision-making process regarding the choice of a secondary school and profession can be classified in three categories. The first group, i.e., directive parents, are convinced of the correctness of their decision and thus impose it on the child; the second group, i.e., parents who enter into a dialogue with their children and treat them as independent and creative individuals capable of taking control of their own destiny, they are ready, if necessary, to provide their children with help; the third group, i.e., liberal parents who leave their children freedom of action. Two subgroups can be distinguished in this group, namely, passive parents, i.e., those who lack knowledge about educational offers or fields of further education, and supportive parents, i.e., those who believe that children can cope on their own and that it is enough to just stimulate them to action and listen carefully to their views and opinions and who with their attitude give their children a sense of security and trust in their own strengths. Most parents (98%) take a very serious approach to the choice of a secondary

school and profession being aware of the consequences it will have for their children's further personal and professional life, as well as of the fact that it will determine their children's future well-being (Wojtasik 2011, 107-108).

1. RESULTS OF OWN RESEARCH

The article presents selected results of the author's own research carried out from January to June, 2023¹. The qualitative study was based on the interview method, where the research technique consisted in an individual, standard, categorized interview, and the research tool was a self-developed Interview Questionnaire.

The research was carried out in three technical secondary schools in Warsaw, i.e. Technikum Mechatroniczne nr 1, Zespół Szkół Licealnych i Technicznych nr 1 (Mechatronics Technical Secondary School No. 1 in the Secondary and Technical School Complex No. 1), Technikum nr 7, Zespół Szkół im. inż. Stanisława Wysockiego d. „Kolejówka” (Technical Secondary School No. 7 in the Stanisław Wysocki Secondary and Technical School Complex formerly “Kolejówka”) and Technikum nr 8 im. Jana Karskiego, Zespół Szkół nr 42 (Jan Karski Technical Secondary School No. 8, School Complex No. 42). The director of the fourth selected school refused to take part in the research.

The research covered 53 parents of first-grade students pursuing education in the following professions: rail transport electrical engineering technician, electrical technician, IT technician, logistics technician, mechatronics technician, programming technician, tourism organization technician, railway transport technician and renewable energy equipment and systems technician. According to the forecast for the demand for employees with vocational education on both national and provincial labour market announced by the Minister of Education and Science (Monitor Polski 2023), the above-listed vocational qualifications are of particular importance for the development of the country, and it is envisaged that they will be in great demand in future. However, research results should not be generalized to the entire population. It is only a fragmentary view limited to the group subjected to the research. The analysis of

¹ The research was carried out as part of an internal project of the Maria Grzegorzewska University, BNS 52/23, implemented based on a competition grant.

the research material was carried out using the MAXQDA 2022 program. The interviews were given consecutive numbers from R1 to R53.

The aim of own research was to identify the difficulties as well as the accompanying circumstances related to the choice of a secondary school in the opinion of parents of first-grade students at technical secondary schools. The subject of the research were parents' experiences regarding the choice of a secondary school by young people.

Reflections on the difficulties prompted the author to formulate the following main problem: What difficulties are related with the choice of a secondary school by young people in the opinion of parents? The following detailed questions were formulated in connection with the main problem:

1. How many students (do not) experience difficulties in choosing a secondary school?
2. What type of difficulties are related to choosing a secondary school?
3. What circumstances accompany students when choosing a secondary school?
4. What is the attitude of parents towards their children's choice of a secondary school?

Using a tool supporting the analysis of qualitative data, i.e., the MAXQDA 2022 program, the focus was on the difficulty category, for which a total of 163 interview fragments were coded. The MAXQDA program enabled a detailed analysis of the research material, as well as selection of statements that were precisely quoted in the article. The article presents the most characteristic statements of the respondents.

The majority of parents included women (87%). Most interviewees were born in the 1970s (62%), fewer in the 1980s (36%), and the fewest number in the 1960s (2%). Most of them have higher education (83%), decidedly fewer have only secondary education (13%), in barely a few cases only vocational and primary education (2% each). The largest groups include parents with two (53%) and three children (20%). 13% of parents have one child. Even fewer interviewees have four, five or six children (6%, 6%, 2% respectively). Children attending the first year of a technical secondary school are in most cases first in the order of birth (60%). Fewer children were born second (36%) and the fewest were born third (4%). Most interviewees are inhabitants of Warsaw (53%), although the number of those living outside Warsaw is only slightly lower (47%).

The category of difficulty allowed to select a group of interviewees who either experienced or did not experience problems in choosing (by their children) an educational and professional path. Moreover, this category allowed to understand the nature of experienced difficulties as well as to define the circumstances in which the decision-making process took place.

Most interviewees stated that their children did not experience any difficulties in choosing a secondary school (64%). Based on 49 fragments of interviews, it can be concluded that difficulties were avoided due to the fact that children had their own interests and a chosen school and profession, which took place in the early years of their childhood or in the last years of primary school. Sample interview fragments: “We knew that it was to be a technical one [secondary school – author’s note]” [R14]; “He said he was interested in circuits, electricity” [R19]; “In the 6th grade, my son planned which school he wanted to go to, so we didn’t have to think too much about it” [R38]; “My son was very specific about what he wanted to do next and what school he wanted to go to” [R50]; “He knew since the 7th grade. He wanted to go to an IT technical secondary school. It’s just the question of where he will be accepted” [R50]; “From the very beginning he was determined which school he wanted to go to [from early childhood – author’s note]” [31]. One of the interviewees emphasized that even though the child had a specific educational plan, an important criterion was meeting the condition of the required GPA: “He wanted to go to a railway school. We discussed what grade average would be needed. My son had good grades. It worked” [R21]. Another parent commented in a similar tone: “He got accepted to school on the first try” [R42].

As one of the parents noted, his child did not experience difficulties in choosing a secondary school because he was familiar with educational offers: “There is a lot of information everywhere, I would say I didn’t [R18].”

Most parents actively support their children in their choice of a school and adopt an attitude which proves that they feel confident in this role and are able to help their child choose a school (Ericson 2017, 497). Parents involved in the decision-making process regarding their children’s choice of a school collect information about schools from various sources, most often school fairs, social networks, and school visits, which play a leading role here (Stewart et al. 2009, 15; cf. West et al. 1995, 33, 37). Among

the most important factors in parents' search for information about secondary schools is the desire to obtain information about the school's reputation, location, and teaching achievements (West et al. 1995, 36).

Some interviewees referred to their attitude towards their children's choice of a secondary school. Some of them did not participate in the decision-making process: "No, because it was my child who chose" [R15]; "We chose the school for our elder daughter, which proved to be a big mistake. From then on, we did not interfere" [R16]; "We had no difficulties because our child chose a school on his own" [R32]. They left the choice of a secondary school to their child, who was fully responsible for the decision. Perhaps this argument was used by parents who were not involved in choosing a school or a profession. As Rose and Milton Friedman note, parents who are not involved in choosing a school are in the minority, "some parents are not interested in their children's learning nor in their ability or willingness to make a rational choice of a school. However, they are in the minority (Friedman and Friedman 1980, 160, West et al. 1995, 36). People bearing the greatest responsibility for the decision about choosing a secondary school for children included the mother (46%), both parents (20%), both parents and the child (11%), the father (7%), the child (7%), the mother and the child (4%), other people (4%) (West et al. 1995, 30).

There was a single statement made on the part of the interviewees that this stage of life may be free from tensions and unpleasant experiences or that it could even be a positive experience: "It was pleasant for me to observe my child" [R37].

This stage, however, was not pleasant for everyone, as evidenced by 7 coded interview fragments. Respondents whose children experienced difficulties in choosing a secondary school even estimated the degree of those difficulties: "Enormous" [R2]; "There were huge difficulties" [R19]. Students did not have to face those difficulties on their own, as they experienced them together with their parents: "Choosing a secondary school is a big difficulty for both parents and children" [R40].

We learn about the types of difficulties that the interviewees and their children encountered from 68 interview fragments. Parents express a conviction that one of the difficulties was lack of defined interests in children, e.g.: "My son has no specific interests and he basically didn't know where he wanted

to go” [R1]; “My son has very limited interests” [R13]; My child didn’t know what he wanted to do” [R17]; “Choosing a profession was the biggest difficulty [R13].”

Others pointed to the lack of knowledge about secondary schools, fields of study and recruitment rules, or lack of skills in using the electronic recruitment system: “Navigating this system was not easy” [R28]; “I’m not from Warsaw, so this choice was difficult for me, too. No orientation, no knowledge; I wasn’t able to advise” [R1]; “At that time, we didn’t know anything about the technical secondary school” [R6]; “We didn’t know, and neither did our child which school to choose” [R14]; “He decided on his own that he wanted to go to a technical secondary school, but he didn’t know which one to choose” [R19]. Not all parents or children have reliable and complete knowledge about educational offers, but experts (e.g. career counsellors) could develop an appropriate database of educational offers and make it available to all interested parties, which would facilitate the choice of a school (Buckley and Schneider 2003, 121-145). One respondent expressed doubts regarding the type of school: “We had difficulties deciding whether our son should choose a general secondary school or a technical secondary school” [R34]. In addition, the respondent pointed to the fact that primary schools failed to disseminate information about secondary schools, their profiles and professions: “There were no profiles of technical secondary schools discussed at our school” [R28]. Pursuant to the Regulation of the Ministry of National Education of February 12, 2019 on career counselling (Rozporządzenie 2019, point 1), career counsellors are obliged to coordinate information and counselling activities carried out by the school, including collecting, updating and providing educational and professional information appropriate for a given level of education, as well as to conduct systematic assessment of students’ needs as regards activities related to the implementation of career counselling and related services. The way students perceive the help of career counsellors in choosing a secondary school and profession is presented in the publication “Pomoc doradcy zawodowego uczniom w wyborze szkoły ponadpodstawowej oraz zawodu poszukiwanego na rynku pracy” (Career counsellor’s help to students in choosing a secondary school and a profession sought on the labour market”) (Pardej 2024, 89-106).

In the interviewees’ statements, there was also a thread regarding the circumstances of the problems they described related to choosing a school, e.g. children’s immaturity, health problems,

educational offer, requirements of a given school and a large number of candidates for the selected school. Students of this age tend to change their minds: “Children at this age change their mind all the time” [R2]; “First he wanted to go to a sports school, then he thought that it might be better to go to a general secondary school” [R2]. They may be indecisive: “She couldn’t make up her mind” [R44]. They may also be emotionally immature to make decisions: “Emotional immaturity. He started school a year earlier” [R25]. The conducted analysis of the collected material shows that children’s health and personality problems created additional difficulties in choosing a field of education: “My child was diagnosed with nystagmus during medical examination, and with a visual defect, he was not admitted to the railway technical secondary school, and we had to change his field of study to another one” [R11]; “My son has a short-lived enthusiasm. He has linguistic, manual, technical and sports talents” [R13]; “He wanted to become a pilot, but he was disqualified due to health issues” [R23]. There was also a case when a child, having decided which profession he wanted to learn, could not find it among the offers of technical schools: “He wanted to become a carpenter, but there was no such a technical secondary school” [R19]. High requirements for school candidates (high GPA) and a limited number of places in schools were other sources of difficulties: “Admission requirements were raised” [R13]; “There is only one such school in Warsaw, the other one is in Siedlce” [R21]; “Too many children to get to the school” [R22]; “We first chose IT in Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki, but he didn’t qualify” [R22]; “He preferred to study renewable energy, but he wasn’t accepted because he didn’t score enough points” [R25]; “There was a double cohort. Ukrainian children arrived, there was a problem with places” [R43]; “He wasn’t accepted during the first recruitment, not because of the points, but due to the lack of places” [R43]; “My son made the choice, but the problem was to meet a number of requirements” [R48]; “We applied for a logistics one at first and we weren’t accepted” [R5]; “He wanted to study rail transport, but there was a problem, because he was accepted for a different field, logistics. He wanted to become a conductor” [R11]; “He didn’t get into a general secondary school” [R13]; “They wanted to go to Wiśniowa, but they didn’t score high enough and they didn’t qualify” [R29]. The choice of a given school is often determined by its high quality of teaching, commonly identified with high scores achieved by children in school tests, but also by subjects/facilities or the atmosphere at a given school, etc. (Gross and Denice 2017, 12-16; West et al.

1995, 31). The choice of a secondary school sometimes implies the need to make certain concessions. Reasons behind resignation from applying for admission to a given school include high tuition fees, lack of places at a given school, admission criteria (religious denomination), too long commuting time to school (West et al. 1995, 31).

In their statements, parents also expressed lack of acceptance for their children's choices issuing from the fact that educational and professional plans for their children did not coincide with those of the children themselves: "My son had some ideas regarding a secondary school and he was in denial that it might not be the best choice" [R4]; "He accepted no arguments that there might be better options" [R4]; "He was adamant that he didn't want to go to a general secondary school, but now he wants to be transferred to a general secondary school" [R6]; "I told him that maybe he should go to a culinary technical secondary school. He said he liked it, but he didn't want to go there" [R14]; "I wanted my son to follow in my footsteps and become a dentist, but he was interested in engines and soldering" [R35], "The difficulty was that my son wanted to go to a general secondary school [and not to a technical secondary school, as his parents wanted – author's note]" [R43]; "Both my husband and I graduated from a general secondary school and so did our daughter, but he had friends at a technical secondary school [the child wanted to study at a technical secondary school, while his parents wanted him to study at a general secondary school – author's note]" [R6]. This is confirmed by the research conducted by Amy Gutmann (2003, 126-148), according to which some parents have their own vision of a "good life" for their children, which results in their choosing a school for them regardless of either the children's or the society's needs.

Sometimes it was difficult for parents to help their children choose a secondary school or a field of study when they knew that their children were not interested either in learning or in a particular profession: "My son does not particularly like studying" [R18]; "I have a gifted child, but he hates writing and learning. However, he has very good manual skills" [R19].

Parents, moreover, provided various motivations for choosing a secondary school by their children: "My sons chose this technical secondary school because of good transport connections" [R29]; "My son was looking for a school on his own. He wanted to find a school where he could learn a specific

profession that would be marketable and would provide him with solid skills” [R52]. According to their beliefs, the reasons behind choosing a school were location and a possibility to acquire the skills needed to perform a given profession. One of the parents did not really know the motivation behind: “He wanted to study mechatronics. I don’t know if he came up with it himself or heard it from his friends” [R39].

Other statements refer to the consequences of the choices made (6 interview fragments): “Everyone, as I later realized, said it was a cool field of study” [R1]; “We came to the conclusion that renewable energy is a good profession” [R6]; “He is not good at physics, mathematics, or chemistry, so the choice of school was made in line with his capabilities. And now there aren’t many of these subjects, and he is coping well with professional subjects. So, I think we’ve solved this problem quite well” [R10]; “I tried to help as much as possible and it probably went well as he doesn’t complain” [R10]; “He was accepted to a technical secondary school and he is happy now” [R13], “My son is relaxed now, and we he is coping very well” [R40].

2. FINAL REFLECTIONS

Most parents (64%) stated that their children did not experience any difficulties in choosing a secondary school. Such difficulties do not occur when:

- a) children have their own interests (thanks to which the decision regarding the choice of a school and a field of study had been made much before the beginning of recruitment to secondary schools)
- b) children obtained the required number of points during recruitment to the selected secondary school (they met the so-called point thresholds, i.e. obtained appropriate results in the eighth-grade exam, had the required GPA in the primary school leaving certificate).

It is worth mentioning that not all parents participated in the decision-making process and then, total responsibility for making the decision rested with children (9%).

Respondents whose children experienced difficulties in choosing a secondary school were in the minority (36%). We can distinguish the following types of difficulties associated with the choice of a secondary school:

- 1) factors inherent in the student:

- a) lack of interests;
- b) frequent change of decision;
- c) health problems;
- 2) external factors:
 - a) insufficient knowledge of parents and their children about the educational offers of secondary schools;
 - b) high requirements of a given school;
 - c) a large number of candidates for the selected school and for the selected field of study;
 - d) considerable distance from the school to the place of residence.

At the time when the surveyed parents and their children were faced with choosing a secondary school, serious phenomena occurred in the education system:

- a) secondary schools were applied for by young people from the so-called double cohort (Sewastianowicz 2022);
- b) state policy and providing assistance to citizens of Ukraine which led to increasing the number of students applying for admission to secondary schools (Ustawa 2022);

Some parents had their own plans as regards their children's education and career that did not coincide with the choices made by their children. Parents also complained that it was difficult to choose a secondary school or a field of study when their children were reluctant to study.

The prevailing belief among the respondents is that the decision led to the right choice because their children would be able to acquire professional qualifications allowing them to perform a specific profession and this belief brings them satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Each individual who has to choose a secondary school should be aware of the advantages offered by education in today's demanding and competitive world. Well-thought-out, accurate decisions

regarding the choice of a school, and especially a technical secondary school, will ultimately translate into the formation of an innovative generation equipped with specific competencies.

Conducting research on the choice of a secondary school – a technical secondary school is extremely important because it contributes to the identification of areas requiring specific changes, e.g. dissemination of knowledge regarding educational offers and recruitment rules for secondary schools among parents, expanding practical knowledge about professions among career counsellors, so that they can prepare students to make an informed choice of a secondary school in accordance with their capabilities.

Ultimately, their implementation will ensure a better adjustment of a secondary school – a technical secondary school to each student and prevent students' educational failures. This research will help to understand students' first career choices.

Parents should actively participate in the decision-making process regarding their children's choice of a secondary school – a technical secondary school by observing their children and making them aware (in daily conversations) of the various options for further education as well as of the consequences of the decisions made. Parents should take into account and respect their children's interests, capabilities and health condition, at the same time, they should avoid being guided only by their own aspirations and expectations if those differ from children's preferences. Parents should take time before the final decision is made to gain knowledge that will help their children choose a secondary school – a technical secondary school by establishing intensive cooperation with a career counsellor.

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