Ways to prevent difficulties in choosing a secondary school in the opinion of vocational teachers

Sposoby zapobiegania trudnościom w wyborze szkoły ponadpodstawowej w opinii nauczycieli przedmiotów zawodowych

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Abstract: Students standing on the third educational threshold when deciding to continue their education at a technical secondary school are obliged to choose a profession. This choice should be dictated by their professional predispositions and interests, which should be identified already in primary school. A wrong decision may have consequences for the student in the future in the form of educational failures, e.g. not receiving a certificate confirming qualifications in the profession, which entitles to practice the profession, school drop-out. According to CKE data, in the last three years the pass rate at the exam confirming qualifications in the profession did not exceed 79%, with the practical part being more difficult for the passers than the written part. A rational decision will increase the pass rate at exams and reduce educational failure. This paper presents the results of a self-study conducted in Polish secondary schools, which aimed to find out how to prevent difficulties in choosing a secondary school in the opinion of teachers of vocational subjects. The qualitative research used the interview method. The analysis of the research material was conducted using the MAXQDA 2022 programme. In the opinion of teachers of vocational subjects, effective solutions to prevent difficulties in choosing a post-primary school and a course of study should be sought in both the family and school environment. A number of solutions were presented, the implementation of which in primary and secondary school as well as in the family environment would improve the decision-making process and ease the transition to secondary school.

Keywords: Polish secondary school, technical school, choice of secondary school, transition, third educational threshold, career counselling, decision-making process.

Abstrakt: Uczniowie stojący na III progu edukacyjnym, decydując się na kontynuowanie edukacji w technikum, zobligowani są do wyboru kierunku kształcenia. Wybór ten powinien być podyktowany ich predyspozycjami zawodowymi i zainteresowaniami, które powinny być rozpoznane już w szkole podstawowej. Niewłaściwie podjęta decyzja może mieć dla ucznia konsekwencje w przyszłości w postaci niepowodzeń edukacyjnych, np. nieotrzymania świadectwa potwierdzającego kwalifikacje w zawodzie, które uprawnia do wykonywania zawodu. Zgodnie z danymi CKE w przeciągu trzech ostatnich lat zdawalność na egzaminie potwierdzającym kwalifikacje w zawodzie nie przekroczyła 79%, przy czym trudniejsza dla zdających okazała się część praktyczna w porównaniu do części pisemnej. Racjonalnie podjęta decyzja zwiększy zda-

walność na egzaminach i zredukuje niepowodzenia edukacyjne. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badań własnych przeprowadzonych w polskich szkołach średnich, których celem było poznanie sposobów zapobiegania trudnościom w wyborze szkoły ponadpodstawowej w opinii nauczycieli przedmiotów zawodowych. W badaniach jakościowych wykorzystano metodę wywiadu. Analizę materiału badawczego przeprowadzono z wykorzystaniem programu MAXQDA 2022. W opinii nauczycieli przedmiotów zawodowych skutecznych rozwiązań zapobiegających trudnościom w wyborze szkoły ponadpodstawowej i kierunku kształcenia należy szukać zarówno w środowisku rodzinnym, jak i szkolnym. Przedstawiono szereg rozwiązań, których zaimplementowanie w szkole podstawowej i szkole ponadpodstawowej oraz w środowisku rodzinnym usprawniłoby proces decyzyjny i ułatwiłoby przejście do szkoły średniej.

Słowa kluczowe: polska szkoła średnia, technikum, wybór szkoły ponadpodstawowej, przejście, trzeci próg edukacyjny, doradztwo zawodowe, proces decyzyjny

Introduction

The transition from primary to secondary school is a difficult time for both children and their parents, as well as for primary and secondary school teachers, who are seeking to develop a system to facilitate this process. Schools focus on administrative and organisational procedures, while children's and parents' reflections concentrate on the social and personal experiences characteristic of this period (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008, 217).

During this time, children are most likely to experience anxiety, a decline in self-esteem, motivation to learn and confidence in their own successes (Bagnall, Skipper and Fox 2020, 206-226; Rice, Frederickson and Seymour 2010, 3; Gutman and Eccles 2007, 522-537; Zeedyk et al. 2003, 67-79). Although students are concerned about increasing homework requirements, changes in the social hierarchy, lack of organisational continuity or making friends, they are positive about continuing their education in post-primary school. However, students are more optimistic about learning in secondary school before starting than after (Mackenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan 2012, 311; see also Pointon 2000, 375-382). Most children quickly adapt to the new situation and new school environment (Evangelou et al. 2008, IV) and anxiety subsides by the first semester of secondary school (Galton, Morrison and Pell 2000, 341-363). Students in the transition period need support in terms of their needs for safety, relatedness (belonging to a group, acceptance), autonomy (independence and responsibility), competence (being competent in the tasks undertaken), enjoyment (the satisfaction of participating in a lesson taught by a teacher with expertise), and identity development (the emergence of new interests following interactions with peers) (Visser et al. 2023, 322).

The intervention to support the student in the transition to secondary school should start in the final year of primary school and continue into secondary school. Not only students need to be catered for, but also families, who are also assigned a significant role in the decision-making process related to the choice of secondary school. It is worth mentioning that parents adopt different (from active to passive) attitudes with regard to participation in the decision-making

process (Wojtasik 2011, 107-108). With the support of parents, they would be able to understand the changes their children are going through and how to help them (Curson, Wilson-Smith and Holliman 2019, 22, see also Bagnall, Skipper and Fox 2020, 214). The experiences of older siblings are also helpful for students in their decision-making. Having an older sibling in secondary school reduces the social risk index (Mackenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan 2012, 311). Difficulties in the transition to secondary school are significantly related to parental education and household income, and there are small systematic differences by social class. Children of low-skilled and less well-off parents feel more pressure and difficulties (Smyth and Privalko 2022, 14; see also Duda and Kukla 2012, 34).

Research assumptions

The aim of our research was to find out how to prevent difficulties in choosing a secondary school in the opinion of vocational subject teachers (see Pardej 2024)[1]. The subject of the own research was the observations of teachers of vocational subjects concerning the choice of secondary school by young people.

The reflections on difficulties led the author to formulate the following main problem: How can difficulties in choosing a secondary school and a course of study be prevented in the opinion of vocational subject teachers? The main problem was formulated with detailed questions:

1. What methods do primary schools use to prevent difficulties in choosing a secondary school and course of study?
2. What methods do secondary schools use to prevent difficulties in choosing a secondary school and course of study?

This article presents some of the results of the author's own research. The qualitative study used the interview method, where the research technique was an individual, standard, categorised interview and the research instrument was the author's Interview Questionnaire.

The research was carried out in three technical schools in Warsaw, i.e. the Mechatronics Technical School No. 1 in the Secondary and Technical School Complex No. 1, Technical School No. 7 in the Stanisław Wysocki School Complex and the Jan Karski Technical School No. 8 at School Complex No. 42. The director of the fourth selected technical school refused to allow the study to take place.

The research covered 13 vocational subject teachers - theoretical vocational subject teachers and a practical vocational training teacher providing education in the following occupations (in alphabetical order): rail transport electrician technician, electrician technician, IT technician, logistics technician, mechatronics technician, programming technician, tourism organisation technician, rail transport technician and renewable energy devices and systems technician. According to the forecast of demand for employees in vocational education

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[1] The author aimed to identify difficulties and accompanying circumstances related to the choice of secondary school in the opinion of parents of first-grade students of a technical school.

professions on the national and voivodeship labour market announced by the Minister of Education and Science (Monitor Polski 2023), these occupations are of particular importance for the development of the country and are expected to be in special demand. The results of the study should not be generalised to the entire group of vocational subject teachers. It is a sectional view, referring to the group under study. The results of the research were used to identify themes in order to deepen the research in the future by including themes of particular relevance to vocational subject teachers that resonated during the interviews, and to conduct the research on a representative research sample in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship. The research material was analysed using the MAXQDA 2022 program. The interviews were given consecutive numbers from N1 to N13.

Results of own research

Using the MAXQDA 2022 program, 39 interview fragments were coded. The MAXQDA 2022 program made it possible to analyse the research material in detail, as well as to select the statements that are faithfully quoted in the various sections of the article. We have limited ourselves to citing the most characteristic statements made by respondents.

Vocational subject teachers in technical schools are predominantly male (62%). The largest groups are teachers of theoretical vocational education and teachers of practical vocational education (54%) as well as teachers of theoretical vocational subjects (38%), and the smallest are teachers of practical vocational subjects (8%). The longest experience in the teaching profession is observed among those working for 20-29 years (46%), significantly less among those working for 10-19 years (30%), and the least among those working in schools for 30–39 years (8%), 40-49 years (8%) and less than 9 years (8%). The respondents included teachers with no pedagogical training (8%), beginner teachers (8%), contract teachers (15%), appointed teachers (23%) and certified teachers (46%). In this group, 85% of people worked elsewhere before starting to teach at school. In the last three years, the majority of teachers have improved their professional qualifications (69%).

Methods of preventing difficulties in choosing a secondary school and a course of study used in primary schools.

Pupils in primary school are prepared to choose a school and profession, e.g. they talk to a school counsellor/educator about the profession, school, vocational work (414 responses), they get acquainted with offers of secondary schools (388 responses) and learn where to find information about jobs, professions (332 responses), they participate in interest groups (331 responses), they take part in competitions and tournaments (301 responses), they get acquainted with the ways of working in different professions (298 responses), they are diagnosed in terms of interests and abilities (297 responses), they participate in additional classes in particular subjects (293 responses), they are introduced to the situation on

the labour market (290 responses) (Klementowska 2018, 166). When choosing a school and a profession, students most often use information leaflets (56%), the Internet (55%), television (52%), less often radio (48%) and magazines (44%) (Klementowska 2018, 169).

Primary school teachers observe their students over many years and are important participants in the decision-making process. Students recognise their qualities in this respect and believe that "they know the teachers of their subjects in secondary schools; they know how the available opportunities for teaching a subject are used in these school; they can advise on the choice of school or profile; they know the graduates of schools, they invite them to homeroom to talk to them about the school" (Kamieniecka 2015, 26). However, students do not expect them to be their counsellors and to effectively solve their problems related to further education (Kamieniecka 2015, 27).

Parents often play an important role in the decision-making process. Sources of information about the secondary school for parents include brochures about the school (94%), a visit to the school (13%), spontaneously acquired information (friends – 34%, parents of children in secondary school – 33%, children including siblings – 31%, parents with children in their preferred secondary school – 30%), as well as information obtained from teachers or principals of primary schools (29%) and parents of children attending primary school (26%). Parents tend to focus on getting information about the academic side of the school or the subjects offered (50%), the results of school-leaving examinations (33%), information about the atmosphere of the school (30%), specific subjects (24%), and discipline at school (21%). They learned about school exam results from school brochures (70%), the local press (18%), secondary school staff (10%), other parents (10%), friends (8%), primary school staff (2%) (West et al. 1995, 33-34).

According to one respondent, the environment influencing the choice of secondary school is both school and family. However, the respondent attributes different roles to them: "The school has an influence by organising career guidance classes. It has less influence on what the child is interested in. In addition, the family has an influence through the attitude that parents have towards their child. If a child is interested in something, parents can help them develop that passion" [N4]. In the school environment, the provision of assistance in the choice of a secondary school is primarily the responsibility of the vocational counsellor, whose duty is to implement the curriculum content included in the Regulation of the Ministry of Education of 12 February 2019 on vocational counselling (Official Journal 2019, item 325) during the lessons. The family environment, on the other hand, is credited with unlimited opportunities to develop a child's interests, which are often discovered at school or in extracurricular activities: "In primary school there are subjects where pupils draw, do artwork, do something. This is when the child discovers their abilities. They can also discover their abilities in extra-curricular activities, not necessarily organised at school" [N4]. Another teacher notes that the attitude of the primary school teacher is significant in fostering a student's passion for exploring a topic:

"Sometimes someone has a great biology teacher. They start to learn the subject, start to like it, even though they were not interested in biology before" [N10]. Early skill development and engagement in primary school alleviate the difficulties associated with choosing a secondary school (Galton and McLellan 2018, 255-277).

In addition, other demands resound from the narrative. Among the respondents, there were some who thought that in order for the assistance given to young people by a career counsellor to be effective, they should be properly trained: "Better training of career counsellors, psychologists in terms of their knowledge of the specific profession, field of study" [N7]. Another teacher also notes the need for career counsellors to expand their knowledge of specific secondary schools and gives a ready solution on how to do this: "Career counsellors should attend school open days to acquire knowledge about schools. And they don't have the knowledge of the schools; they don't know what profile of child should go here" [N12]. Technical school teachers are open to establishing cooperation with career counsellors: "We don't have career counsellors who would like to get information, they don't even call" [N12]. The career counsellor, in their opinion, should know the specifics of the professions in question and the contraindications to performing them: "These counsellors need to know the specifics of the profession. Students come to us with an opinion from a psychologist, according to which the student cannot be exposed to stress and noise. And if he's a railwayman and someone steps on his tracks, I think he won't know whether to brake or not. Repairs are often noisy and what is he going to say then: be quiet and don't knock, because I can't concentrate? Counsellors need to be better educated" [N7]. It is noteworthy that, according to Mechthilda Richter, Célina Clément and Eric Flavier (2022, 376), students with a statement of need for special education present a positive self-image and have a more positive attitude towards learning in secondary school than in primary school. This is especially the case when the transition to secondary school is planned and prepared by adults (parents, teachers, professionals).

Career counsellors (67%) acknowledge that young people's need for a counselling service is diagnosed. Typically, the diagnosis is performed by most full-time counsellors (80%) and most lower secondary school students are diagnosed (66%) (Podwójcic 2015, 85). Parents of students on the educational threshold consider that they do not recall or have never heard that careers guidance is organised at school. Some of them said that sometimes their children told them about their impressions of the counselling sessions. However, they do not receive any information about this from tutors or careers counsellors. It is important to emphasise that parents do not make a distinction between a counsellor and a teacher in the context of education (Kamieniecka 2015, 32). What students expect from a vocational counsellor is, above all, professional support and assistance in choosing a course of study, support in their decisions, help in seeing their strengths and weaknesses, objectivity, professional and extensive knowledge, as well as knowledge of the current situation on the labour market (Czerw and Bielas 2020, 82).

According to the respondents, the teaching staff at primary school should cooperate with employers and organise excursions to workplaces for their pupils and their parents: "Primary schools should organise excursions to companies that would bring the profession closer. This is not being done, and it is very important. "We used to organise such trips for primary school children" [N3], "The employer should have funds set aside for a meeting with students and their parents, during which he could introduce them to a real career offer" [N6].

Few students attend meetings with employers (8%) or take advice from counsellors from the Voluntary Labour Corps (7%). Most frequently, meetings with secondary school representatives are organised on the premises of the primary school the students attend (67%) (Klementowska 2018, 168)

Methods of preventing difficulties in choosing a secondary school and course of study used in secondary schools

From the coded fragments of the statements of vocational subject teachers relating to suggestions for preventing difficulties in choosing a secondary school and a profession, we learn that: "If students come to school open days, they will learn more" [N2]; "So-called talks and open days introducing the profession are important" [N3]; "During school open days there should be meetings for students and teachers of primary schools, during which they would have to do some professional task, they would have to test something. They would then understand what the profession is all about. In my opinion, this is the only method" [N5]; "During school open days we get to know the student and the parent. We could show them the equipment the school has, but also tell them what equipment we don't have. So that students understand that the reality of school can be different from what is in the core curriculum" [N9]; "Open days should strive for integration. Outsiders can take a look at the school, observe what the students and teachers are like. It is too early to learn about personality, but a primary school student could look at the things he likes to do; to see if this is really what he likes to do" [N10]. As we can see, according to teachers participation in open days organised by schools is very important. Thanks to these meetings, candidates can broaden their knowledge of the profession in direct conversation with teachers.

Information on websites about schools and the professions they teach could be helpful in the selection: "Posting information on school websites" [N11]. One of the demands made by a teacher was to promote schools: "Schools should promote themselves by showing what they do" [N11]. The information should be enriched with messages on further educational pathways: "Profession is one thing. Destination is important, i.e. where they graduate from higher education. There is no information about what they will learn in a given profession" [N9].

Vocational subject teachers also make a number of other demands. One respondent, following civilizational changes, decided to propose online meetings and gave an overview of them: "There could be online meetings organised by the Education Office. There should be projects: representatives from the school (1 student, 1 teacher and someone from the management) would meet with career

counsellors. They would then tell them what kind of children should or should not be in a technical school" [N12]. Other quoted statements concerned the change of name of both the school and the subjects: "Change of name. Returning to the previously applicable names: electrical technical school, carpentry technical school, and not technical school number... this and this. This name means nothing to students and parents, unlike the name: mechatronics technical school, because it is associated with a specific profession" [N8]. This would help potential candidates and their parents to navigate more smoothly through school offers. Teachers of vocational subjects, given their place of employment, most often spoke about the propositions that technical schools can offer to primary school graduates and their parents, which are helpful in the decision-making process regarding the choice of a secondary school.

In the interviews conducted, there was a warning about what single guidelines should not be followed in choosing a secondary school: "One should not be guided only by typical rankings, such as Perspektywy. It is not the only determinant" [N10], "Parents come to us and say that their son is interested in railways. And he goes to the railway school even though he has various impairments, e.g. sight, hearing" [N7]. The statements quoted show that it is important to proceed carefully in connection with the choice of secondary school and to take into account a number of factors for future success and avoidance of failure. It may be helpful to familiarise yourself with the job description, the physical and health and psychological requirements, and to pay particular attention to the (absolute and relative) contraindications to the job in question.

Conclusions of own research

In the opinion of teachers of vocational subjects, effective solutions to prevent difficulties in choosing a secondary school and a course of study should be sought both in the family and school environment.

In the family environment, children's and young people's interests can be stimulated and developed. Parents can also send their children to extra-curricular activities (although these often involve additional costs).

As far as the school environment is concerned, they expect slightly different measures to be taken in this area in primary and secondary schools.

With regard to primary schools, the interviewed teachers focused on the role of the career counsellor. According to them, such a person should have up-to-date knowledge of the specifics of each profession. Therefore, career counsellors should participate in training sessions and open days in schools. In addition, respondents would expect careers counsellors to be familiar with the learning conditions and atmosphere of the post-primary school. This will enable them to support the student more effectively – taking into account his or her aptitude - in making the right choice. The teachers surveyed also highlighted the importance of excursions to companies organised during primary school education. They complained that

this form of introducing students to the work of particular professions had become a thing of the past.

From the respondents' statements, it can be concluded that open days aimed at students, parents but also career counsellors play a key role in secondary schools, with the aim of familiarising them with the school and the professions taught there. Teachers also note the need to formulate transparent educational offers.

According to the teachers surveyed, parents, together with their children, should make the decision related to the choice of school carefully and take into account a number of factors at the same time, e.g.: the school's place in the ranking, the predisposition to study at a particular school and in a particular profession, the child's state of health.

Conclusion

Teachers who took part in the research postulate the following:

1. extending the programme of open days aimed at students, parents and careers counsellors to include the opportunity to talk to students and teachers of secondary schools and to demonstrate the solving of sample tasks in vocational subjects;
2. online promotion of the secondary school and its advantages as well as the professions taught there – with an indication of their specificities and further education opportunities;
3. organising online meetings with secondary school representatives;
4. a change in the naming of schools, where the defining term of a technical school would be a name referring to the profession taught, e.g. mechatronic technical school;
5. organising trips to companies during primary school education in order to familiarise students with work in specific professions;
6. meetings between employers and pupils and parents to present the profession in question from a practical point of view - terms and conditions of employment, requirements for workers in particular jobs;
7. further training of careers counsellors on the specifics of the professions and secondary schools;
8. promotion of knowledge by career advisors about the principles of operation and use of the electronic recruitment system;
9. making decisions that take multiple factors into account simultaneously.

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