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Teachers of Polish Vocational Schools vs. Changes in the Model of Employment and Organization of Work

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Abstract

One of the main reasons standing behind today’s organizational and substantial changes that have affected vocational education in Poland concerns continuing changes in the field of employment and organization of work – which is the consequence of technological and scientific development, globalization of economy, European integration processes, geographical and professional migrations and the development of multicultural and information society. In order to align vocational education with the challenges of modern civilization, several efforts have been made, e.g. encouraging specialists (reflective practitioners) to get employed at vocational schools and substantial training for vocational school teachers. The purpose of this paper is also to answer the following questions: What is the opinion of vocational school teachers regarding the changes at the modern labour market and its increasing flexibility? How do they judge vocational school students in terms of their readiness to deal with the dynamic model of employment? How do they see their role in this sort of preparation? What kind of challenges do modern teachers have to face? The conclusions from theoretical analysis, supported by the results from the study (MNiSW grant), have shown, among other things, that modern teachers function in the environment of unique, open situations and dynamic changes in educational contents. Thus, they should be characterized by creativity and good intuition in noticing bonds between knowledge, technology and demands of the labour market. Another important attribute is innovativeness, understood as a specific kind of thinking, organizing knowledge, perceiving the world and creating new perspectives.

Keywords: Vocational school teachers, vocational education, preparation to flexible forms of employment and organization of work;

1. Changes concerning Polish vocational education. Introduction

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Major changes (mostly since 1999) concerning vocational education have been mainly dependent on structural changes in Polish economy and their relevance towards the labour market, as well as the processes of European integration. Among the tendencies that have influenced the dynamic changes on the labour market since Poland became the member of the EU – and further the organization and vocational education processes – it is worth to point out (as the title of this paper suggests) the following phenomena: the demand for new professions and qualifications, the increasing number of people working seasonally and the increasing importance of temporary employment (Kwiatkowski, 2001). The European context of changes in vocational education referring to the objectives of the reviewed Lisbon Strategy, the introduction of the concept of lifelong learning (LLL), European and national qualification frameworks and tools improving the level of vocational and continuing education (ECVET, EQARF, EUROPASS). Among the most important factors that determine changes occurring in vocational education there are: globalization processes – opening country borders and supranational institutions of learning societies and based-on-knowledge economy; development of information society, which: produces, maintains, processes and utilizes information; phenomena influencing the development of vocational education processes, e.g., the development of distance education (Stochmialek, 2005). Another reasons (organizational and substantial) justifying the transformation in the field of vocational education in Poland – indicated by the Department for Vocational Training and Continuing Education at the Ministry of National Education – are also: “ [...] the changes in the organization of work, being partially a consequence of technological changes and increasing expectations of employees regarding the level of competence among employees”(Ministry of National Education, 2010).

To minimize the consequences of vocational education marginalization and its maladjustment to the demands of open and flexible labour market, several scenarios have been developed in order to fix the situation. Taking into account various views in this matter and being aware of the problem, it is worth indicating the following solutions: 1) more extensive cooperation between vocational schools and economy (in its broad sense), i.e.: larger contribution of employers in organizing apprenticeships, preparing exams for professional certificates, exchanging personnel: entrepreneurial training for teachers and participation of economic practitioners in school education; 2) increasing the effectiveness of practical training conducted in school workshops, practical training centres and workplaces; 3) putting more focus on linguistic education (conducting classes of basic vocational subjects in foreign languages, popularization of students’ and teachers’ international exchange, organization of joint exams together with other schools in EU plus acknowledging gained qualifications); 4) legal adjustments regarding requirements concerning supplemental education and professional improvement of vocational school teachers: periodic trainings, national and international internships (Kwiatkowski, 2007). Another step taken by the Ministry of National Education is to implement an online system of educational and vocational information, as well as educational and vocational guidance. The vocational information system will not only include detailed information about future jobs and labour market trends, but also actual job offers, employment investment schemes and training offers (Kulpa-Puczyńska, 2012).

Changes concerning Polish vocational education force systematic improvement of didactic personnel (its potential and dedication), which is indispensable in order for the proposed transformations to succeed. It is very important because it is increasingly more difficult to engage young, highly qualified teachers of vocational subjects; there is no will from older teachers to raise and update their teaching skills plus the offer of supplemental education for teachers is not satisfactory (e.g., internships, substantial and entrepreneuria l trainings). What is more, effective collaboration between schools and employers (one of the basic presumptions of the ongoing reform of vocational education) requires the teachers to update their expertise (especially vocational subjects) by the most recent trends and field-specific technology and adjust their skills to knowledge economy (Ministry of National Education, 2011). Thus, the actual changes area heading towards modernization of techno-didactic groundwork and creating a system of substantial support for teachers, which should engage certified experts, branch specialists and methodology advisors. Here it should be pointed out that the National Centre for Supporting Vocational and Continuing Education (NCSVCE) has actively supported vocational education in implementing the abovementioned changes. One of its tasks concerns the development of nationwide improvement programmes for vocational and continuing education teachers and vocational guidance consultants; and administering the national network for collaboration and self-education addressed towards vocational school teachers educating themselves in unique specialties (National Centre for Supporting Vocational and Continuing Education, 2013). The abovementioned actions match the challenge set by the European Commission, which constitutes about making it easier for the graduates to enter the working world by increasing practical vocational knowledge, improving the coordination in education and actions undertaken by institutions which organize trainings and facilitate access to labour market (OECD, 2000 and
2. Description of vocational school teachers

When describing vocational school teachers, it must be underscored, that there are two groups: 1) teachers of core subjects 2) teachers of vocational subjects, including teachers of theoretical vocational subjects and teachers conducting practical training. Apart from what has been mentioned above, the description of the studied population should be prefaced by general information comprised in the report about the condition of Polish teaching staff. Thus, from the data collected by the Ministry of National Education (substantial for the undertaken problem) it comes out that in the school year of 2010/2011 schools and educational and upbringing institutions employed the total of 665,073 teachers, 10% of which were teachers of vocational subjects. Taking into account the working time, the largest group (82%) included teachers with full number of course hours, whose weekly working hours equalled or exceeded full-time employment. Moreover, the decisive majority of the described population (81,3%) are women. Whereas, their share in teaching vocational subjects made up 55,66% and was 24% lower than the share in teaching core subjects. The average age of the teachers was slightly over 41. However, teachers of vocational subjects (average age being 44) were definitely older than teachers of core subjects. The first group comprised of two major age ranges: 32–34 and 51–56 y. o. It should be added that the most numerous group consisted of certified teachers (44,3% of all employed teachers) and people with university degrees (97,6%). The number of specialist subject teachers has also increased. The most numerous vocational specialties in the 2010/2011 school year included: artistic, economic, trade and mechanical specialties. It was also very popular to take advantage of different forms of professional development, especially short courses (lasting about 20 hours), which were taken by 78% of all employed teachers (ORE - Centre for Education Development, 2011). Here we should highlight the fact that the system of promoting and motivating teachers to improve their skills constitutes another scope of changes being introduced in order to improve the quality of Polish vocational education. Nevertheless, the basing aims of modern teachers’ professional development include: increasingly better use of knowledge and skills (both old and new skills which help in solving vocational tasks); regular and continuous analysis of working conditions and working processes – striving for their improvement, developing skills of seeking solutions in difficult and new situations (Duraj – Nowakowa, 2000).

Taking into account the study carried out by the author of this text – 41,0% of respondents (50 people) are teachers of theoretical vocational subjects and another 31,1% are teachers conducting practical training (38 people). The studied group consisted also of 28 teachers of core subjects (23,0% of all studied people) and five school counsellors and a vocational guidance consultant. It should be added that the group of teachers of core subjects included teachers of the subject called “business basics”. The majority of the surveyed group consisted of women (53,3% of all studied people) and people over 40 years old (57,4%). These were teachers with long professional experience – 59% of studied teachers have been working in their profession for over 15 years. Thus, the largest group comprise of nominated and certified teachers – a total of 87,7%. Vast majority of the studied people (almost 91,0%) have had the university degree.

The analysis of selected aspects of this problem has been supported by data from the study titled: “The preparation of vocational school students to flexible forms of employment and work organization”, which has been financed from the research funds in 2009–2010 as a promoter research project (MNiSW grant no. N N106 019236). 630 students and 122 teachers (from basic vocational schools, secondary vocational schools and post-secondary schools) plus 20 labour market institutions and 74 companies of different size and business profiles have been surveyed. The results of the study have been acquired with the help of the poll method and the techniques of a survey questionnaire and an interview – prepared for the sole purpose of the study.

3. Positive and negative aspects concerning the flexibility of employment according to the studied teachers

One of the attributes of modern labour markets – determined by increasing competition (mainly because of globalization) – is their growing need for flexibility. Flexible labour market is characterized mainly by flexibility referring to wages, working time, qualifications, job positions and professional and spatial mobility of labour force. Flexibility of labour market is the ability of the market (employers and employees) to adjust quickly to new market conditions and technologies (Adnett, 1996). Special importance is dedicated to the flexibility of employment, which
in a broad spectrum of views means changing working conditions in order to adjust them to alternating conditions and dynamic functioning within enterprises. The basic determinant influencing the flexibility of employment is allowing flexibility in working time planning (Carnoy, 2000; United Nations Development Programme, 2004). It is also increasingly popular to take advantage of changing, pluralistic forms of part-time employment, as well as forms of spatial flexibility of work. Although the observed changes on the labour market do not eliminate the standards of traditional model of employment (they only distort it), they undergo a new division concerning: payment, social benefits, job position and career opportunities (Beck, 2004).

The results of the study confirmed that in Poland it is the traditional forms of employment that are dominant, which is the consequence of limited awareness about non-standard forms of employment and organization of work, not to mention about the belief that those forms are worse and imposed. Nevertheless, one of the features that distinguish the Polish labour market from other markets in the EU is a comparatively large use of flexible forms of employment such as contracts for a specified period and other contracts (contracts for specific work and mandate agreements). On the other hand, flexible forms of working time planning are now a rather “luxury”, non-financial benefit, offered by only some employers. Although many enterprises confirmed using at least one of the flexible forms, in comparison to other EU countries, its commonness (e.g., in order to allow the employee to reconcile their working hours with their family life) is too faint (Polish National Bank, 2013). It might be the reason why the answer of 65.5% of the studied people to the following question: “should flexible forms of employment and flexible organization of work be more common?” was definitely yes or rather yes. Even though, they have noticed many negative aspects of its use. According to the respondents, most concerns referring to popularizing flexible forms of employment arise from the fact that we still do not have sufficient knowledge about these forms (including the so-called “good practices”) and we often tend to think stereotypically. It must be pointed out that our lack of awareness concerns mostly flexible forms of the organization of work. The studied respondents agreed that actions promoting flexible forms should focus on: 1) proper legal regulations; 2) preparation of employees to different forms of employment and organization of work 3) securing social benefits similar to those offered in case of full-time employment and 4) implementation of solutions that combine flexibility of employment with social security.

When answering the question about benefits which can be obtained by a worker using flexible forms of employment and organization of work (as well as the costs of flexible employment), respondents have marked each of the possible answers with the following indicators: 5 – I totally agree, 4 – I agree, 3 – I am not sure, 2 – I disagree, 1 – I totally disagree. Thus, in order to conduct the analysis in three groups (teachers, students and employers) the following evaluation ranges have been applied: 4.51–5 – undoubted positive answer; 3.51–4.5 – positive answer; 2.51–3.5 – no opinion; 1.51–2.5 – negative answer; 1–1.5 – undoubted negative answer. The results have shown that vocational school teachers agree with all the existing benefits, which is proven by the total average amounting to 3.64. However, the largest advantage of using flexible forms of employment and organization of work, according to the studied respondents, is “the possibility to combine work with studying” (average = 4,11). Such an answer means that the respondents were able to take a broader view on flexible forms of employment, in the context of different spheres of life and modern challenges (e.g., the need for continuous learning). Although in practice the studied teachers have had problems with improving their professional qualifications themselves. Among the most important advantages associated with flexible employment (table 1.) the respondents have mentioned: more freedom in choosing the type and place of work and the possibility of individual planning of their working time, which to some extent resembles the profession of a teacher, although the vast majority of them were using the traditional model of employment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Costs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Give more freedom in choosing the type and place of work</td>
<td>4,07</td>
<td>Provide lower standards of social security</td>
<td>3,34</td>
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Among four surveyed groups (with students, employers and representatives of labour market institutions) it is the teachers who have noticed most inconveniences associated with using flexible forms of employment. It is most likely because of the fact that they have most often had contact with the classical model of employment and so they might not have had sufficient knowledge about flexible forms of employment and organization of work. Lacking sufficient knowledge about these forms (from the practical point of view) and basing their opinion on the views presented in the media (which they have remarked themselves), their point of view was mostly limited to seeing drawbacks. And so the first place, according to teachers (but also according to students and employers) belongs to the following answer: “flexible forms of employment require high availability”. We cannot disagree with this opinion, because flexibility of working time entails the increasing number of employees, who dedicate professional duties most of their time. However, it must be underscored that such job constraint (and employment insecurity) can also be found in the traditional model of employment. For example, the problem concerns improper organization of work or multi-shift work. Among other, significant for the studied teachers, disadvantages concerning flexible employment we find: “taking full responsibility for one’s professional development” (choice average of 3,65) and “increasing staff rotation” (choice average of 3,56). It is also noteworthy to mention that the respondents have noticed that both costs and advantages concerning a specific form depend mostly on the legislation associated with employment and its security. These are also associated with the type of professional tasks performed by employees and their professional and personal situation. Thus, in case of most forms of flexible employment and organization of work (and we speak of its high heterogeneity), it is not possible to attribute similar costs to the same types of people (employees and employers).

The fact that the surveyed vocational school teachers were aware of negative implications concerning flexible forms of employment and organization of work is important from the point of view of the process that prepares young people to work. Such knowledge is indispensable when taking decisions on professional issues. It is only necessary to work on the attitude of certain teachers, who derive from the classical model of employment and are not very likely to pay attention to changes occurring on the labour market and their consequences. It is also noteworthy to mention that the key role in the process of preparation to flexible forms of employment and

| Enable individual organization of working time | 3,78 | III | Increase in staff rotation | 3,56 | III |
| Allow for combining work with studying | 4,11 | I | Oblige to take full responsibility for one’s professional development | 3,65 | II |
| Make it possible to work for more than one employer | 3,74 | V | Require high availability | 3,81 | I |
| Facilitate gaining professional experience | 3,78 | III | Diminish employee-employer relationship | 3,46 | IV |
| Allow for performing work that does not require specific qualifications | 3,07 | VII | Strengthen the feeling of employment insecurity | 3,43 | V |
| Reduce the cost of commuting | 2,94 | VIII | Restrict family life | 3,03 | VIII |
| Help reconcile professional duties with family life | 3,61 | VI | Do not favour eliminating problems associated with the performed job | 3,19 | VII |

Choice average (advantages) 3,64 - Choice average (costs) 3,43 -
Standard deviation 0,42 - Standard deviation 0,25 -
Basic standard ranges 4,06-3,22 - Basic standard ranges 3,68-3,18 -
organization of work is played by teachers of entrepreneurship. The undertakings carried out at the studied schools were based on their activeness and creativity. They are people who ran their own business in the past or were professionally connected with institutions which support individual entrepreneurs, i.e. combining theory with practise. However, the effectiveness of vocational education depends on the work of all teachers (their qualifications and competencies, motivation to work and applying proper methods and means of education).

4. The role of vocational school teachers in preparation to changes within the model of employment. Conclusions

The subject literature highlights the fact that a teacher should: interact with students towards their balanced and continuous development; teach young people how to be flexible, resourceful, open to the world; be a compassionate person who is aware of the conditions of their work, capable of processing and filtering information and an innovator striving for continuous improvement, capable of functioning in dynamically changing conditions (European Commission, 2004; Meighan, 2000). Taking into account the subject of this paper, it should be added that a modern vocational school teacher should also actively participate in the process of preparing students to changes in the model of employment and organization of work, to function in a post-industrial society (called “knowledge society” or “service class society”), where apart from knowledge there is another key skill – creativity – that enhances development. Modern approach to vocational preparation includes quitting the concept of finding one job for the whole life and treating frequent job changes as a norm. Moreover, it also includes noticing and taking advantage of labour market phenomena: decreasing number of full-time jobs, development of non-standard forms of employment and opportunities concerning flexible attitude towards the number of employees, working time, work place and organization of work. Thus, it is necessary to encourage vocational school teachers to taking active interest in what is happening on global and local job markets – therefore, we need various forms of sharing knowledge among teachers, employers and representatives of labour market institutions: common meetings, seminars, training sessions, projects. This goes in line with the opinion of the surveyed respondents: “proper preparation to work can be provided only by a well-prepared teaching staff”. Among other important actions concerning the analyzed field, we find:

- Making sure that the Interscholar System of Vocational Guidance is not only an item existing in school documents but stimulates real, organized and regular collaboration of teachers, students, parents and local environments. Also, personnel consultancy actions should be undertaken.
- Information about flexible forms of organization of work should be published in publications concerning various vocational subjects. More time and publishing space should concern legal regulations associated with these form, with both positive and negative aspects of their use (mainly from the employee's point of view).
- In the process of preparing to work, including flexible forms of employment and organization of work, it is important to expand knowledge and improve professional skills in working conditions – preferably in real conditions and modern enterprises.

Changes concerning the preparation of young people to function in the flexible labour market, according to the surveyed teachers, should focus on: adjusting the content of vocational education to the requirements of the modern labour market; limiting core education towards vocational education; increasing the number of hours for “business basics”; putting more focus on social competencies; supporting students by enabling constant access to vocational guidance; taking care of their practical preparation. The abovementioned answers prove that it is necessary to prepare young people to changes occurring in ways of employments and organization of work in such a way that they are given proper tools that will help them prepare to a specific type of job. We need to prepare flexible workers capable of functioning in the world of flexible forms of employment and organization of work. It is not only about specific knowledge or skills but also about the awareness that the model of employment is changing and brings us new, alternative solutions. The proposed changes are challenges every modern teacher has to face – they include: using a broad scope of education strategy, taking into account students’ various needs; being capable of sharing knowledge and practical experience with students; regular cooperation with local communities; promoting mobility and international cooperation. Besides, “[…] teachers should be equipped to respond to the evolving challenges of the knowledge society, participate actively in it and prepare learners to be autonomous lifelong learners. They
should, therefore, be able to reflect on the processes of learning and teaching through an ongoing engagement with subject knowledge, curriculum content, pedagogy, innovation, research, and the social and cultural dimensions of education” (European Commission, 2004).

Having taken into account the results of the study but also having analyzed available reports and other publications, we can indicate basic problems modern vocational school teachers have to deal with: 1) teachers have low skills of creating their own tools that would use the latest technical and information sources; 2) teachers do not show tendencies to regularly improve their qualifications; 3) teachers have very limited contact with entrepreneurial reality; 4) in the context of human labour, teachers are rather traditional thinkers. Changing the described reality constitute another challenges which require proper actions not only from teachers but also from the Polish system of vocational education. The material for building is already there – large potential of teachers, their creativity and readiness to change.

References


