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Strengthening school and labour market connections on the example of German solutions

Comparative research conducted in European countries in the last ten years has had a special focus on the processes of marketisation in education and on building relationships between the school and the labour market. This area also arouses the interest of education politicians by setting the direction of educational reforms. The nature of the connections between and the process of transition from school to the labour market is the subject of many comparative studies in the German-language literature (See Baethge, Solga&Wieck, 2007). On the example of Germany — a federal country with sixteen different education systems (Nowosad, 2013, p. 89) — learning solutions focused on strengthening cooperation between the school and the labour market creates the opportunity to show the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. An analysis of German experiences may result in the adaptation of foreign pedagogical achievements on the ground of native activities, and the results obtained can be an impulse to remove barriers and irregularities in the functioning of analyzed reality.

Keywords: labour pedagogy, education and the labour market, education system in Germany, entrepreneurship, marketization of education, transition

Umacnianie powiązań szkoły i rynku pracy na przykładzie rozwiązań niemieckich

Badania porównawcze prowadzone w krajach europejskich w ostatnich dziesięciu latach w szczególności sposób koncentrują się na procesach urynkowienia oświaty i budowania związków między szkołą a rynkiem pracy. Obszar ten wzbudza również zainteresowanie polityków oświatowych, wyznaczając kierunek reform edukacji. Specyfika powiązań i proces przejścia (tranzykcji) ze szkoły na rynek pracy stanowi przedmiot wielu badań komparatystycznych w niemieckojęzycznej literaturze przedmiotu (por. Baethge, Solga i Wieck, 2007). Na przykładzie Niemiec — kraju federalnego, w którym funkcjonuje szesnaście systemów edukacyjnych (Nowosad, 2013, s. 89), poznanie rozwiązań zorientowanych na zacieśnianie współpracy szkoły i rynku pracy stwarza możliwość ukazania wieloaspektowości badanego zjawiska. Analiza niemieckich

doświadczeń może skutkować zaadaptowaniem zagranicznych osiągnięć pedagogicznych na grunt rodzimych działań, a uzyskane wyniki stanowić impuls do usuwania barier i nieprawidłowości funkcjonowania badanej rzeczywistości.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika pracy, edukacja a rynek pracy, system edukacji w Niemczech, przedsiębiorczość, tranzycja, urynkowanie edukacji

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Introduction¹

The contemporary transformations taking place in the area of education are changing the approach to recognising the effectiveness of education and are focused on seeking strategies to ensure high-quality education, including school and labour market connections. The need to build and strengthen relations between the educational system and the economy is an important area being emphasised in the political and educational debates of highly developed countries, and the initiatives undertaken are aimed at developing partnerships. Experts believe that this is possible thanks to an understanding of 'the nature and conditions of contemporary work by the school and the specifics of the school by employers' (Kwiatkowski, 2013, p. 20). Based on the experience already gained, however, attention is being drawn to the one-sided nature of this relationship. It is school that, as an element of the social system, remains under pressure from the labour market (Bogaj&Kwiatkowski, 2006, p. 7).

The basis for working out changes in labour-market-orientated education is dialogue and cooperation with the economy. OECD Education Department Director Andreas Schleicher points to the need for countries to develop systemic solutions 'that go beyond just optimising the current educational system' (Schleicher, 2007, p. 165). Rapid changes in the labour market 'leading to the emergence of a global knowledge society have a decisive impact on the education landscape' (Ibid., p. 158). This situation generates new challenges addressed to all entities of the educational system. Not all countries have found systemic solutions that allow graduates to take up a satisfying job after completing their education. One interesting example is Germany, a country where since 2007 the percentage of unemployed people aged 15–24 has been consistently falling, and since 2011 has been the lowest among European Union countries. Questions are emerging: what actions have allowed for such satisfying results? What solutions are the developed countries adopting in strengthening school and labour market connections, and to what extent do they achieve the intended goals?

Student firms in the creation of an integrated environment of school and the labour market

The last two decades have seen priority given to the quality and effectiveness of educational processes in Germany's educational policy (Döbert & Zedler, 2009, pp. 25–33; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2016a). The issues discussed have gained political support and constitute an important stimulus conducive to the process of reforming education. These changes are made through the implementation of long-term strategies as political innovations at the federal level in schools (Rürup, 2006, p. 13).

¹ The article was based on a doctoral dissertation entitled 'Student companies in the educational system of Germany', defended at the University of Zielona Góra on 5.12.2017 and written under the scientific direction of Dr hab. Inetta Nowosad, Prof. UZ.

In the educational system of Germany, student-run companies propose solutions for strengthening relationships between education and the economy. These are long-term strategies supported at the federal level as educational projects, in which there are four organisational forms to choose from. Students develop a business like a real company. A real reference to market conditions allows them to acquire professional competences through practical learning and problem-solving.

Student firm projects operate within the *Entrepreneurship to School* initiative group (Initiativkreis Unternehmensgeist in die Schulen) and are implemented in cooperation with two ministries at the national level: the Federal Ministry of Economy and Energy (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie) and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung). The student firm is important in educational policy and is intensively supported by it. It refers to the concept of political innovation, which testifies to specific changes and development. It is part of educational reforms focused on creating a modern economy.

Student firms were established for the first time in Germany in 1975. They were introduced to primary schools in the 1980s as a pedagogical experiment. In Stanisław Palka's opinion, 'examples of methodological, programme, organisational, and institutional solutions used in some countries can be used in others ... or creatively transformed' (2006, p. 103). Recognising these areas through comparative analyses enriches the theoretical knowledge and serves 'pedagogical practices, giving them the chance to use regularities in making didactic and educational decisions' (ibid.). Exploring foreign educational experiences provides criteria for assessing domestic education and may lead to seeking ways to improve it (Rabczuk, 1998, p. 7). The analysis devoted to the connections between the school and the labour market, taking into account one of the solutions adopted in Germany — student firms — may indicate effective solutions, especially in the context of how to equip graduates with the necessary competences to facilitate their transition from school education to the labour market.

Connections between student firms, school, and the labour market

One of the priorities contributing to strengthening the connections between the schools and the labour market is the development of a flexible and needs-orientated educational system. This approach determines changes in three basic areas. First of all, attention is drawn to the need to focus activities in the field of vocational counselling at schools on developing students' skills for choosing a further educational and vocational path based on information obtained from monitoring the labour market. The second important need is to involve practitioners in the educational process. Engaging entrepreneurs, employers, and business experts allows education to be organised in line with the needs of the economy and learning outcomes to be verified through apprenticeships and internships by students in the workplace (Gerlach, 2017, p. 23). The third scope of activities stresses an increased emphasis on developing students' practical skills, including initiative and entrepreneurial attitudes. Accentuating the need to foster skills such as self-education, perceiving and solving problems, combining

theory with practice, effective communication, or teamwork corresponds with the expectations of employers (Kwiatkowski, 2001).

The first of the identified problem areas is associated with changes in the conditions of the socio-economic environment that determine the need to re-orientate the goals and tasks of the orientation and career guidance system. The dynamic nature of the labour market clearly makes it difficult for students to define their own educational and professional plans (See Piorunek, 2011, pp. 133–150). In this decision-making process, the ability to identify and interpret market situations is basic, but not enough. In order to have a full picture about the labour market, it is necessary to create opportunities for comparing skills and ideas with the individual aspirations, beliefs, and aptitudes of students, which is the basis for developing competences within the creation of one's own biography (Rosalska, 2013, p. 263). In addition, in the context of lifelong education, the selection of one's profession or path of education is not a single act, but it occurs at various stages of life. This means that the task of the school is to shape competences related to planning, setting goals, and being willing to continually decide on subsequent changes and 'functioning in change, and not only [in situations – M.Z.] choosing a profession or school' (ibid., p. 259). This form of help significantly expands the perspectives for formulating the goals and tasks of schools' vocational counselling system and requires integration of the career guidance and counselling system with the educational process.

In Germany, the orientation and professional guidance process in the educational system is governed by federal, state, and local regulations (Frey-Huppert & Niemeyer, 2009, p. 3). The cooperation between the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit) and the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Culture (Ständige Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder) imposes on municipal employment agencies (Arbeitsagenturen) a statutory obligation to conduct professional orientation in schools and to establish agreements with various partners to provide counselling services at all stages of education. The preamble to the framework agreement between the Federal Employment Agency and the Standing Conference of Education Ministers states that 'preparing young people to enter the world of work is not only the central task of schools and career counselling, but also of the economy and other local and regional entities' (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004, p. 3). Career counselling is recognised as one of the key areas for 'creating an open, attractive, and accessible learning environment . . . The role, quality and coordination of information and career counselling services should be empowered in such a way as to support education at all ages . . . and to enable citizens to guide their learning and work, in particular to facilitate their access and development by creating various learning opportunities and career paths. The individual requirements and needs of different target groups should be taken into account (Council of the European Union, 2004, p. 26). Enriching activities in the field of orientation and career guidance is possible thanks to the additional support for schools which resulted from their cooperation with external institutions conducting information activities or providing specialised advisory assistance.

An important element of support for school programmes of educational and professional orientation is the initiatives which support school programmes under the system of educational and professional orientation. One example can be the firms being run by students in schools (see Zapotoczna, 2016, pp. 93–99). The analysis

of reports on the implementation of professional guidance indicates that in schools where student firms are established, the school professional guidance system programmes are updated more frequently, information is displayed in school showcases, information databases are created on educational opportunities, occupations, and the situation on the labour market, and additional mechanisms and tools are developed to support student decision-making (Landesinstitut für Lehrerbildung und Schulentwicklung, 2012, p. 14). The existence of student-run firms also clearly determines the topics covered in orientation and professional guidance lessons or as part of classes containing such elements. The content covers the basics of business operations: finance, accounting, marketing, promotional activities, formal and legal aspects, and issues related to the choice of profession and knowledge about the labour market — characteristics of selected professions, individualised profiles of interests and predispositions, identification of strengths and weaknesses, learning and work styles, determinants of the choice of profession, educational options, and the conditions on the labour market.

Another important aspect indicated in the reports is the possibility of conducting direct student counseling, which brings about measurable benefits. By taking action, teenagers attending school are better prepared for conscious career planning. The choice of a further educational path, in line with the predispositions and needs of the labour market, affects the motivation of students to learn and helps overcome possible learning difficulties (Rahmenlehrplan, 2009, p. 29).

The second problem area is the need for social and business partners, such as entrepreneurs, employers, and experts, to engage in the training. This situation creates new opportunities to establish a dialogue between the schools and representatives of the local labour market, as well as to use social resources in supporting the development of young people's potential in the area of their professional functioning.

The inclusion of representatives of the environment and local entrepreneurs in education is evidently supported by experts (Dietrich, 2008). Direct contact with entrepreneurs allows young people to verify their perceptions about the labour market, such as the functioning of the company or the specifics of the entrepreneur's work. Expert studies also indicate that such initiatives are an important instrument of regional development policy. In general, especially in less-developed or more remote regions, cooperation results in building direct bonds between the school community and the local community, and has positive effects — including increasing the number of school graduates who are employed in a given area (European Commission, 2005, p. 55).

In the German-language literature on the subject, the process of creating cooperation networks at a regional level is referred to as learning regions (*lernende Regionen*) (Nowosad, 2010, p. 175). Student firms are part of the efforts to strengthen cooperation between the educational system and the economy, making a measurable contribution to preparing young people to enter the labour market. They constitute a form of support for young people enabling them to gain experience and learn the realities of the economy before taking up professional activity (Übergänge, 2006, p. 78). They also contribute to increasing the emphasis on developing practical skills, profiling education in terms of the current needs of the labour market, and functioning in the realities of the economy.

The existence of student firms in schools increases the synergy effect resulting from the school's association with external stakeholders. It creates real possibilities of establishing cooperation between the school

and external entities, and as a result leads to the exchange of information and to activities for the professional and/or social activation of young people. The involvement of social partners in professional training makes it possible for young people to learn the realities of the economy and to acquire practical skills, and consequently facilitates their entering the labour market (Dietrich, 2013, p. 358).

In creating a good start on the labour market, student firms are an important alternative to vocational education, particularly the dual system. The good situation of graduates on the German labour market is partly due to the existence of an effective system which supports young people in the process of transitioning to the labour market using systemic solutions undertaken as part of professional training. This makes it possible to understand why in Germany the percentage of youth unemployment (ages 15–24) has been the lowest in the European Union classification since 2012.² In Germany, activities aimed at strengthening education and economic relationships have a long tradition, and dual education is worth mentioning as an example of effective solutions. Vocational education in the dual system has been most fully developed in vocational schools. Today, solutions are being sought that will equally effectively prepare high school students for activity on the labour market. Student firms play an important role in this area, as they allow students of general secondary schools, while for vocational school students they can be a source of new experiences.

The third problem area emphasises the need to support students' practical skills, including initiative and entrepreneurial attitudes in a school setting. The adoption of such an assumption by experts/researchers results from the low level of entrepreneurship among young people, which in the long run leads to underemployment or difficulties in taking up employment after completing education (OECD, 1999, p. 82). One of the reasons for the difficult situation of young people on the labour market in European Union countries is the gap between the quality of formal education and its real value on the labour market. In a situation of a relatively high level of unemployment among young people in European countries, a competence mismatch may be the case (Kwiatkowski, 2013, p. 21). According to S. M. Kwiatkowski, the differences between the level of competences possessed by school graduates and those desired by potential employers result primarily from competency shortages, i.e. the lack of specific professional skills and social competences in such areas as group work, interpersonal relationships, independence, and entrepreneurship.

In the documents of the most important institutions of the European Union, much attention is paid to the promotion of key competences being factors ensuring increased competitiveness (Recommendation, 2006). An important recommendation is the need to include in national legal regulations and curricula at the level of compulsory education initiatives aimed at developing skills desired on the labour market and stimulating an open and flexible learning process. The focus is on the relationship between school education and the economy (Eurydice, 2002, p. 11). In Germany, entrepreneurship education is given particular importance, which is in

² Statistical data from June 2019 show that the lowest unemployment rate among young Europeans (15–24 years) is found in Germany, at 5.5%. In Poland, this indicator is close to the average of the European Union countries (PL: 10.9%, average: 14.1%), while the list of 29 countries is closed by Greece, where this figure is close to 40%. See: Europäische Union, Jugendarbeitslosenquoten in den Mitgliedsstaaten, Statista, Juni 2019, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/74795/umfrage/jugendarbeitslosigkeit-in-europa/>, accessed 6.08.2019.

line with the recommendations of the Parliament and the European Council.³ The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) has developed entrepreneurship as a long-term goal at all levels of education in the general education canon. Entrepreneurship is currently an inseparable element of national curricula, which aim to develop students' attitudes and skills, including initiative, creativity, readiness to take risks, and the ability to plan projects and achieve the intended goals.⁴

The recommendations of the ministries of education of individual federal states emphasise that schools developing entrepreneurship are not limited to the transfer of theoretical knowledge, but enrich educational offers with a practical aspect that allows them to create a school learning environment through action and teamwork. Educational authorities also recommend schools to focus more on educational methods that develop students' independence. At the same time, they indicate the need to develop new forms of learning based on work in small groups and aimed at cooperation with a non-school environment, especially with the labour market.⁵ Alternative forms of education, such as learning by doing, open learning, or combining theory with practice, are gaining importance. This approach emphasises the need for learning *for* and *about* entrepreneurship (Foster, 2003, p. 455). In the strategy for entrepreneurship development, the learning outcomes in this field are defined in three areas: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The example of student firms combines theoretical knowledge with practice and the opportunity to compare their skills with reality. On the one hand, learning takes place through experience; on the other hand, familiarising oneself with theoretical issues allows one to understand economic phenomena and mechanisms of the labour market.

Summary

The current state and perspectives of student firms in Germany illustrate the significant local diversity of the initiatives taken. It is worth remembering that centrally supported enterprises constitute a significant — though not the only — group of initiatives. Many federal states use proven, centrally supported projects, while others support grassroots initiatives more often. At regional and local levels in many federal states, actions are taken

³ Entrepreneurship/sense of initiative are one of the eight key competences. This aspect is highlighted in the document, Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/WE); Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Technologie, *Gemeinsam für mehr Unternehmergeist*, Februar 2010; H. Schaeper, *Hochschulbildung und Schlüsselkompetenzen*. In: *Hochschullandschaft im Wandel*, U. Teichler, R. Tippelt (eds.), *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik, Beiheft 50*, Beltz Verlag, Weinheim-Basel 2005, p. 209–220.

⁴ Entrepreneurship has been included in secondary school curricula in all federal states of Germany, and some of its elements are also implemented at the level of primary education within subjects in the fields of social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics, and technology.

⁵ This direction was particularly clearly displayed in the strategic documents of the Standing Conference of the National Ministers of Education and Culture: Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz, *Handreichung für die Erarbeitung von Rahmenlehrplänen der Kultusministerkonferenz für den berufsbezogenen Unterricht in der Berufsschule und ihre Abstimmung mit Ausbildungsordnungen des Bundes für anerkannte Ausbildungsberufe*, Berlin, 23 September 2011; Sekretariat der Ständigen Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder, *Beschlüsse der Kultusministerkonferenz Förderstrategie für leistungsschwächere Schülerinnen und Schüler*, Wolters Kluwer, Köln 2010.

to implement pilot projects to support the process of strengthening school connections with the labour market. Among federal states, there are also those that develop their own procedures, mechanisms, and tools, such as the integration of local entrepreneurs in the education of young people, which is reflected in educational regulations and their inclusion in national strategies. There is also a group of federal states in which involvement in the implementation of pilot projects meeting the needs of the region and supporting the process of constituting such projects as student firms in school establishments is noticeable.

One of the arguments justifying undertaking the undergoing search is the high demand existing in Poland for the transformation of existing system solutions orientated towards building and/or strengthening relationships between the school and the labour market. Solutions that will allow students to develop entrepreneurial attitudes in the realities of a dynamically changing economy. In the Polish education system, despite the experience gained in the functioning of even student cooperatives in schools, there are no explicit formal and legal regulations. Basic solutions and guidelines are required by the relationship between the school and the cooperative and the scope of powers of the school authorities as the unit supervising the activities of students.⁶

The activity of new solutions is equally important. In Polish upper-secondary schools, students can run a 'Youth mini-enterprise' as part of a project coordinated by the Youth Enterprise Foundation with the support of the Ministry of National Education, the National Bank of Poland, and the business community (Fundacja Młodzieżowej Przedsiębiorczości, 2019). Simultaneous solutions are another problem in Polish education. The implementation of the school project takes place in virtual reality and involves running a fictitious firm organised on the model of real business. Although the organisation and functioning of the firm corresponds to the actual conditions of the workplace, all activities take place in isolation in a protected environment without any real reference to the market reality. The inability to maintain contact with the external environment deprives the company run by students of an important element of authenticity.

The developed conclusions are part of the considerations for supporting processes focused on the effectiveness of education and the integration of the school into the labour market. They are also an impulse for in-depth discussion on the possibilities of supporting education and stimulating the entrepreneurial attitudes of students in school settings. An analysis of German experiences can contribute to the improvement of the educational reality in Poland by indicating effective solutions in the field of activities focused on preparing young people for active participation in social and professional life.

⁶ Student cooperatives, being an integral part of adult cooperatives, are defined as intra-school organisations without legal subjectivity and established on the basis of cooperative law. Meanwhile, the lack of basic formal and legal solutions for this type of cooperatives significantly hinders their implementation. At the beginning of the '90s, the number of student cooperatives in Poland dropped significantly: from over 18,000 to 3. According to the estimated data of the Student Co-operative Development Foundation, in 2012 student cooperatives operated in about 6,000 schools in Poland, mainly in the Dolnośląskie, Małopolskie, Masovian, and Silesian voivodships. See: Sprawozdanie merytoryczne z działalności Fundacji Rozwoju Spółdzielczości Uczniowskiej w 2012 roku; R. Stawicki, Historia i teraźniejszość spółdzielni uczniowskich w Polsce, Biuro Analiz i Dokumentacji Kancelarii Senatu, kwiecień 2012.