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## EDUCATIONALISATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

### EDUKACJONALIZACJA I JEJ SKUTKI DLA WSPÓŁCZESNEGO SPOŁECZEŃSTWA

**ABSTRACT:** This text presents a few reflections on the processes formatting contemporary conditions for the functioning of individuals in Western society. It proposes a general presentation of the socio-cultural syndrome of educationalisation. Learning (education) becomes a tool, a task, an effect (in the form of an attitude of readiness for the constant development of skills), which defines the logic of action of contemporary people. This text should be seen as a contribution to a broader analysis of social processes related to the growing importance of educational institutions in the contemporary world.

The first part presents the main features of the syndrome of educationalisation as a process resulting from the expansion of formal education institutions. The author points out here the importance of school education in changing the way of peoples' ways of thinking over the decades and in locating the value of education at the centre of Western culture. The second part of the text presents the influence of education on various spheres of functioning of individuals. The author shows how educational logic begins to regulate the activities of individuals in fields so far not associated with education.

**KEYWORDS:** education, educationalisation, educational policy, culture.

**ABSTRAKT:** Tekst ten przedstawia kilka refleksji na temat procesów kształtujących współczesne warunki funkcjonowania jednostek w społeczeństwie zachodnim. Proponuje on ogólną prezentację społeczno-kulturowego syndromu edukacjonalizacji. Uczenie się (edukacja) staje się narzędziem, zadaniem, efektem (w postaci postawy gotowości do ciągłego rozwoju umiejętności), który określa logikę działania współczesnego człowieka. Tekst ten stanowi wkład w szerszą analizę procesów społecznych związanych z rosnącym znaczeniem instytucji edukacyjnych we współczesnym świecie.

W pierwszej części przedstawiono główne cechy syndromu edukacjonalizacji. Autor wskazuje tutaj na znaczenie edukacji szkolnej w zmianie sposobu myślenia ludzi na przestrzeni dziesięcioleci oraz w umiejscowieniu wartości edukacji w centrum kultury zachodniej. W drugiej części tekstu przedstawiono wpływ edukacji na różne sfery funkcjonowania jednostek. Autor pokazuje, jak logika edukacyjna zaczyna regulować działalność jednostek w dziedzinach dotychczas niezwiązanych z edukacją.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** edukacja, edukacjonalizacja, polityka edukacyjna, kultura.

In December 2019, an OECD report titled “Skills Strategy Poland” was released (OECD 2019). This is the fourteenth study of this type that has been produced until now for Austria, Flanders (Belgium) Italy, Korea, Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain<sup>1</sup>. In each study, the reader will find an extensive diagnosis of the state of functioning of mechanisms of development and the use of skills

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about OECD Skills Strategy reports see: <http://www.oecd.org/skills/nationalskillsstrategies/buildingeffectiveskillsstrategiesatnationalandlocallevels.htm>.

by the inhabitants of a given country as well as recommendations for national authorities on how to support the processes of development and the use of skills. Importantly, from an OECD perspective, it is crucial to point out deficits and opportunities for the development of skill formation and use by the adult population. On the OECD website which includes the report for Poland, three main ideas are highlighted:

- Fostering a more responsive education system and attractive adult learning opportunities can equip Poland with skills for the future.
- Polish employers can better make use of workers' skills by adopting more high-performance work practices.
- About 60% of Polish adults report that they do not participate and do not want to participate in adult education or training.

These three laconic points contain the pillars of international socio-economic policy – pointing out the importance of education, especially adult education, for shaping the skills needed to function not only under current socio-economic conditions but above all in the future; it is important to make adequate use of the potential of skills in the workplace; it is necessary to convince the adult population that education provides opportunities and should become a target for individual investment. Of course, all this should also be a matter of concern for governments which should treat the development and use of skills at every stage of life as a strategic goal. In the case of Poland, this is reflected in the requirements of the European Commission, which actively supports the creation of Skills Strategies for individual countries.

In response to this expectation, work has begun on the Integrated Skills Strategy 2030. The first part of the Strategy, consisting of defining priorities and directions of strategic actions in the areas of formal and non-formal education and conditions for informal learning was adopted by the Council of Ministers in January 2019 (MEN 2019). Work is currently underway on the second part, which will include a more detailed description of the areas of strategic action.

It is not my purpose here to discuss these documents. I point them out as a starting point for reflection on the meaning of educational discourse in the contemporary world. I treat the indicated elements of educational policy and, more broadly, social and economic policy as an expression of a certain socio-cultural syndrome which shapes the way contemporary citizens of developed countries function. I call this syndrome “educationalisation”. Generally speaking, it can be defined as locating educational issues in the centre of the cultural discourse of contemporary societies. However, this needs to be elaborated on.

This text presents a few reflections on the processes formatting contemporary conditions for the functioning of individuals in western society. It seems that these processes are common to the so-called developed countries. Firstly, it derives from the level of

economic development, the development of new technologies and entering the era of industry 4.0, which creates a situation in which training of personnel for the economy becomes a particularly important task and requires work with people of all ages, not only with those of the classically understood school age. Secondly, it is the result of cultural change, which is confronting people with the need to acquire a wide and diverse range of competences and to use increasingly sophisticated knowledge in more than just professional situations, forcing them to resort to increasingly specialised expert systems (see Giddens 1991). In this respect, we are talking about processes described as typical for late or liquid modernity. The term life-long learning makes a career today and ceases to be just a cliché, saying that we have been gathering experiences all our lives. Learning (education) becomes a tool, a task, an effect (in the form of an attitude of readiness for the constant development of skills), which defines the logic of action of contemporary people. This text should be seen as a contribution to a broader analysis of social processes related to the growing importance of educational institutions in the contemporary world.

### **Educationalisation – what is it?**

To put it simply, educationalisation means a progressive process of increasing the importance of formal education institutions in the lives of individuals. The term “educationalisation” describes the mechanisms through which practices, processes and forms related to school education penetrate more and more broad areas of social life. It is also a process related to the fact that formal education is indicated as the main factor responsible for creating and solving various social problems. Moreover, it is indicated that in an increasingly “trained society” [schooled society] schools are shaping more and more aspects of an individual’s life – from methods of bringing up children to marriage patterns and ways of spending free time.

At this point, I skip the discussion on the relationship between the concepts of education, upbringing and socialisation and accept that the concept of education, according to the analytical practice of the sociology of education (see Mikiewicz 2016; 2017), means the processes of the purposeful shaping of skills, attitudes and values by specialised personnel using specific procedures and tools. The notion of education defined in this way means that the processes related to the functioning of so-called formal education (according to the andragogic nomenclature – see Malewski 2010) are the subject of our reflection. And this is where the core of the social syndrome of “educationalisation” is located – it is an effect of the expansion of forms and procedures of formal education into ever wider areas of social life.

The key to understanding the meaning of the educationalisation syndrome is the mechanism of increasing the importance of formal education for the life of individuals in modern society. Established as a tool to support the socialisation of individuals in the face of increasing social and economic complexity, formal education became in the twentieth century a basic element of the biographical experience of individuals. For most of the twentieth century it was a temporal experience – that is, lasting for a certain period of time and being recognised in a given society as a preparation period for “real” life. The usage of terms such as “school age” suggests that an individual is of a typical school age. At the same time, this means that there are also people whose age no longer fits into school – when he or she does not go to school, that is, he or she is not studying. The period of formal training is the time of preparation for professional activity. The expansion of formal education means that this time is consistently extended – from a few years at the beginning of the 20th century to over 12 or even 18 at the turn of the 20th and 21st century (including the period of university studies).

Seeking mechanisms responsible for such an educational expansion, one points to several parallel factors, not always in their concurrent logic. First of all, the links between education and the economy are exposed. It is believed that the development of education is related to the needs of the labour market, where technological progress leads to the transition from an industrial society to a knowledge-based economy. Such economic thinking about education was supported by Gary Becker’s theory of human capital, developed in the 1960s and 1970s (1964). Educational investment has become an element of the strategic development of societies’ wealth, and neoliberal nomenclature and ideology have taken over the sphere of discourse about school and its importance in society. Its essence can be summarised in a laconic statement that the higher the education of citizens, the more productive society is (see Potulicka & Rutkowiak 2010).

The second mechanism stimulating the development of education at subsequent levels was the idea of democratising access to education for all strata and social groups. Educational expansion was meant to be a way of reducing inequalities and meritocratising social allocation processes. In other words, it was not social origin, but skills transferred and tested at school that were to be the basis for recruitment for particular positions in the social structure. Education at ever higher levels was also seen as a tool for creating a civil society (see Hadjar & Becker 2009). Shaping civic attitudes, exercising the competence to participate fully and legitimately in a democratic society is one of the basic tasks that schools have to face.

The disjunction of these three elements causes the institution of mass education as we know it today to be subject to fluctuations resulting from the tension between the various functions that are expected from it. As David Labaree (2012) suggests, in

liberal democracy systems, education policy tries to reconcile the three main objectives of the education system:

- democratic equality, which requires education to “produce” subjective citizens;
- social efficiency, which requires education to prepare productive workers;
- social mobility, which treats education as a way to maintain or improve one’s social position.

Education understood in this way tries to meet the needs of the three sides of social life. According to Labaree (2012), the first dimension of education corresponds to the political aspect and is supposed to work for the efficiency of the state system. The second dimension presented above is the response of education to the needs of employers and taxpayers who want it to prepare participants of economic life. The third dimension represents the needs and expectations of consumers of education – families and future employees, who treat it as a tool for obtaining the necessary resources and as symbols which allow them to achieve the highest possible profits in the future.

As a result, education is seen as both a public and a private good, preserving the interests of the collective and the individual. Education as a public good is a tool for investing in the education of citizens and the quality of workers, which serves society as a whole. On the other hand, education as a tool of social mobility is a private good, which only benefits those who have specific diplomas, a very important currency in the labour market. Therefore, in a society of liberal democracy, education falls into contradiction.

Probably this is what has caused mass education to be criticised from the very beginning. For this reason, it is constantly being subject to reforms aimed at establishing a system that will finally meet public expectations. This in turn pushes its development and makes education an increasingly important part of the social puzzle. The indicated mechanism of cultural contradictions in the discourse on education is a tool to go beyond the existing framework of educational logic – a framework that unambiguously links education with school and the ritual of teaching.

One of the most important analysts indicating the importance of educational expansion is David P. Baker (2009, 2011). He points out that during the 20th and 21st century there was an educational revolution, which made formal education one of the most important institutions of contemporary society. Even if at its origins mass education was the result of adapting mechanisms of socialisation and professional preparation to the requirements of the changing social and economic world, at least since the mid-20th century we can speak of education as a shaping rather than a shaped institution. In this sense, formal education looks and works not only in terms of accommodating structures

and functions to the requirements of the modern world (as we used to treat it), but also in terms of determining in an overwhelming way what happens in other social fields.

The formative role of education consists of two mechanisms. Firstly, it is the allocation role in the social structure. The fact that today education has become the main channel of social mobility makes educational achievements a first-rate currency on the labour market and a factor building stratification structures. The second, perhaps more important component is the socialisation function of education, and being more precise, the “knowledge-creative” function of formal school. School trains, shapes knowledge, builds attitudes and values. To put it very generally, it shapes the way of thinking. The way of thinking of contemporary people is significantly different from how people thought and acted a hundred years ago. It is an effect of mass school training. It is not about the amount of information provided at school, but about the specific ways of thinking or acting of the mind, which are the result of this training. To put it another way, it is an effect of a specific educational culture, in which the cult of knowledge and competence lies at the centre.

This special status of academic knowledge – perhaps it is better to say: knowledge acquired and evaluated at school – is associated with the importance of knowledge in a post-industrial society, where cognitive competence becomes a key resource for individuals, a basic element of the perception of quality and human relevance. Phrases such as “critical thinking”, “problem-solving skills”, “higher order thinking”, “critical thinking”, etc., are the watchwords of civilisation today. This makes education one of the most important social institutions.

The development of mass education changed the functioning of social institutions by changing the way people think. According to Baker, three elements are crucial here. Firstly, it is the very fact of attending school, which, according to research, clearly changes the way individuals think. As psychological research indicates, people who have contact with educational institutions acquire skills of abstract thinking, change the functioning of memory, etc. Learning to read, write, count, even at the most elementary level, leads to the development of metacognitive competence: people who went to school and experienced school education tend to think in a significantly different way from those who did not have such an experience. Research on intelligence (measured by IQ level) shows that the average IQ level in the human population has increased significantly over the last 100 years. This is an increase that cannot be explained by the evolution of the species alone (too rapid a progress). The main suspect here is mass formal education (see Baker 2011).

Secondly, we observe a progressive development of curricula from narrow specialization and content related primarily to preparation for professional work, to critical thinking and problem solving. Baker calls it the academicisation of education. The

narrowly understood vocational education over the years has been replaced by more academic education. Currently, only 16% of learners participate in this kind of education path (worldwide average). This does not mean, however, that education is dominated by academicity associated with the earlier education of the elite, which is understood as classical education, associated with participation in the so-called high culture. This kind of education gives way to broadly understood problems-based education, based on the development of quite abstract concepts of cognitive competence.

The third dimension of mental change is the spread of the idea of cognitive development as a value in contemporary culture. This is a direct result of the educational revolution, which made everyone today believe that it is possible, worthwhile and necessary to invest in the development of the competences of individuals: their own and most of all children. It changes the parental culture and co-creates a specific formation of parentocracy. Maryellen Schaub (2010) points out that today almost all mothers read to their children. In the 1950s, only 50% of mothers declared this. Today, not only do mothers with a higher level of education believe that the development of a child should be supported, but those with a lower level of education do too.

### **How educationalisation affects peoples' lives**

In regards to the transfer of school forms into other spheres of life, it is pointed out that the forms and practices developed on the basis of school education are used for activities in other fields of social intervention: in medicine, penitentiary practices, social work, labour market policy. It refers to various forms of training, which are used to “educate” people in very different spheres of social activity. Examples include “birthing schools”, “aggression and conflict management training”, “company training”. Competences that are currently acquired in these kinds of forms were previously acquired informally, in other (natural) forms of social life – in personal relationships, in the workplace, during social meetings. Today, the transfer of these competences is framed in a way of training – this can be described as the formalisation of the previously non-formal education. It can also be considered as another stage of modern rationalisation, where the ranges of skills, socialised in natural social relations, often unintentionally, unconsciously, are now being made aware, reflective, formatted in the form of a curriculum and are implemented by specialised personnel.

In this way, various school forms are transferred to other institutional fields – from bird lovers, through police officers, to specialists in human resources management. In each of these fields it is possible to introduce a student-teacher relationship, prepare a programme, and plan special places for training. It also involves importing school forms of confirming competences: assessment, examination, evaluation, certificate.

Systems of recognition and confirmation of formal qualifications based on skills are being developed in European countries<sup>2</sup>.

In some ways, it is a process similar to what is referred to as medicalisation. Medicalisation means redefining various manifestations of social life, behaviours and problems, through the prism of the language of medicine, thus changing their character and making it possible to apply solutions typical of medicine (see Conrad 2007; Zybortowicz 1995). For example, alcohol addiction is transposed from the moral sphere by defining alcoholism as a disease unit, making it possible to apply medical procedures to the delinquent. Medicalisation is based on the power of medical authority, an assumption about the primacy of medical knowledge over the common one. Similarly, educationalisation is based on the redefinition of social problems in educational terms – as a result of competence deficits. This makes it possible to apply educational solutions in order to eliminate the deficit – for example, training on the effects of drunk driving, etc.

An expression of such an understanding of educationalisation is the spread of such terms as lifelong learning, also referred to as continuing education. Learning ceases to be assigned to a certain phase of life – childhood and youth – but becomes a lifelong activity. It is possible and even necessary to use various forms of education to improve one's qualifications and personal development. An increasing number of studies treat adult learning as a factor influencing aspects of the social functioning of individuals, which until now have been explained mainly by references to formal levels of education – for example, social mobility, social capital, political attitudes (see Gloster et al. 2015; Schuller et al. 2002; Feinstein et al. 2003).

Such processes of educationalisation are accompanied by the theory of lifelong learning and educational work with adults – andragogy. One can observe a shift of emphasis from teaching processes to learning processes that emphasises the importance of competence development processes not only in childhood and youth, but throughout life. From the perspective of classical sociology, it is particularly interesting how the concept of non-formal education coincides meaningfully with that of socialisation. “Pedagogisation” – the making of an issue into a subject of pedagogical and didactic interest – opens up the field for the development of this subject by educational and teaching institutions. We can observe here a flourishing of branches and professions connected with education and its soft version – learning how to learn: trainer, mentor, coach, consultant, tutor.

Another aspect of educationalisation, which is somewhat opposite to that described above, is the process of making formal education responsible for the emergence of

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<sup>2</sup> For more about European Qualification Frameworks see: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/european-qualifications-framework-eqf>.

numerous social problems. The problem of unemployment can be a prime example here. What is an effect of the functioning of mechanisms in the field of the world of work and economy is problematised as an effect of a completely different sphere of activity. To put it a little metaphorically, the economy blames education for the mismatch between employees and the labour market. It is an effect of the widespread belief that education is a function of the labour market. In fact, we could call this phenomenon the appropriation of the field of education by the logic of the economy – many people associate it with the spread of neoliberal ideology.

The last aspect of educationalisation I would like to raise is the shaping of forms of individuals' activity in spheres so far not associated with formal education or schooling. For instance, in communities where recruitment to schools is based on the address of residence, the real estate market overlaps with the education market. Real estate agents advertise the quality of the schools located in the locations of the housing they offer. The quality of the school affects the perceived quality of the property. Education also affects marriage patterns. As one's position in the social class system is increasingly dependent on educational achievements, the marital market becomes structured by school education – couples match each other on the basis of educational attainment (see Davies & Mehta 2013). In terms of bringing up children, research indicates that more and more parents organise their children's free time and the time spent by parents with their children around activities related to competition in the field of formal education – through various forms of talent development: dance, sport, language learning. Thus, we are dealing here with an invasion of the school sphere into the private sphere of the family. Education becomes a task for parents (Ball 2003). The discourse of committed parenthood means tasks for fathers and mothers to take care of the proper selection of children's educational activities. It is both a conscious choice of school and a willingness to engage in children's school life, but it is also an issue of compulsion to combine children's leisure time with developmental activities. What used to be a sphere of spontaneous activity in peer groups is now becoming an object of parental responsibility. This in itself gives rise to further educational needs – confused parents seek training on how to support their children's development...

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this text was to draw attention to a number of dimensions of social and cultural change caused by the expansion of formal education. All of this is observed in the paradoxical context of the criticism of the school as an institution – supposedly not fitting the logic of the modern world because it was invented a long time ago under completely different economic, social and cultural circumstances. All over the world,

ideas of alternative education and new ways of learning, new forms, emergent teaching methods, techniques, tools using modern communication technologies appear. Interestingly, however, nobody denies the need for education (see Gutiérrez-Esteban & Mikiewicz 2013). This ‘demand for education’ itself is an expression of the educationalisation syndrome – today we cannot think of a society without the institution of formal education, and that which is informal ends up being translated into the language of formal education – if only by promoting mechanisms of formal confirmation of qualifications through such solutions as European Qualification Frameworks.

One of the effects of such an understanding of education is a change in the logic of educational policy. The term “educational policy” ceases to be associated only with the sphere of formal education up to secondary school level or the sphere of higher education, but it begins to refer to spheres and stages of life so far associated rather with social policy (social work) or economic policy. The medium of this “expansion” is the concept of life-long learning, which symbolically “authorises” educational policy makers to enter the fields reserved for marketing and human resource management specialists or employees of labour market institutions. In Poland, this is done through system solutions, e.g. the Integrated Skills Strategy 2030, indicated at the beginning of this paper. The key institution responsible for creating strategies for the development and use of skills is the Ministry of National Education, which should be considered as a symbolic indication of the meaning of an “educational” dimension of economic and social life. The Minister of National Education is also the coordinator of the Integrated Qualification System. One can have the impression that educational policy is becoming a key public policy and education is becoming the main value that organises contemporary societies.

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