

Piotr Krawczyk

Maria Grzegorzewska University, Warszawa

Education and career counselling in Warsaw's lower secondary schools: Assessments by school-based career counselling coordinators

“The point is that man should do willingly what he must do...”

T. Kotarbiński, *Praxiology: An introduction to the science of efficient action*

Supporting young people in planning their education paths and professional careers is among the core responsibilities of schools. The obligations of schools and school staff with regard to education and career counselling have been defined with increased accuracy in the state's educational policy as expressed in the legislation amending the Regulation on the provision and organisation of psychological and pedagogical help in educational institutions. At the same time, many studies indicate that there is a gap between the law-stipulated model and its implementation. The article discusses the author's research findings on factors that impede education and career counselling in schools and analyses difficulties and obstacles faced by those responsible for providing counselling to lower secondary school students.

Keywords: education and career counselling, school counselling system coordinators, career counsellors

The Minister of National Education's Regulation concerning rules on providing and organisation of psychological and pedagogical help in public pre-schools, schools and other establishments¹ defined the responsibilities of schools, teachers and school-based specialists (guidance counsellors, school psychologists, career counsellors, pedagogical therapists) with regard to psychological and pedagogical aid-provision, i.e. identifying students' individual psychophysical capacities and development and meeting their specific educational needs. Based on the Regulation, school heads must employ a career counsellor or appoint a teacher, a form teacher or a specialist to plan and execute educational and career counselling tasks. Directly defined in the Regulation, the responsibilities of a career counsellor (or a relevant appointee) include identifying students' demand for educational and vocational

¹ The Regulation of 2013 amended the Regulation of 2010.

information, collecting and imparting necessary information and assisting students in planning their educational paths and vocational careers. The Regulation stipulates also that measures must be taken to sustain the harmonised functioning of the school counselling system, including support for and cooperation with teachers and coordination of the institution's information and advisory activities.

The study reported in this article was carried out among Warsaw Career Counselling System (WCCS) coordinators, appointed by the Education Office [Biuro Edukacji] to implement a systemic support model for Warsaw schools in providing education and career counselling for the youth. Conducted in schools that had implemented the systemic solutions, the research aimed to analyse effects of the measures implemented by educational authorities (see Krawczyk, 2016).

In the school year 2014/2015, when the WCCS was launched, Warsaw had 177 primary schools, 113 lower secondary schools, 88 secondary schools, 44 secondary technical schools, 24 basic vocational schools and 23 psychological and pedagogical counselling centres (Educational Information System/System Informacji Edukacyjnej [EIS], 2016). In the first stage of the project, the system's organisational structure was constructed based on individuals tasked with coordinating educational and career counselling at their workplaces.

Altogether 486 WCCS coordinators were appointed, therein 446 school-based coordinators in all schools under the Education Office, 23 coordinators in psychological and pedagogical counselling centres and 17 coordinators representing education departments of Warsaw's borough offices. It was decided that, in the initial period, the work of the WCCS would focus on lower secondary schools, followed by secondary schools in the following year and primary schools later. The sequence was suggested by internal analyses of the Warsaw Education Office and is consistent with implications of several studies on the demand for education and career counselling services (see Educational Research Institute/Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych [ERI], 2013; ERI, 2016; Czepiel, 2013). Briefly, the studies concluded that school counselling was most flawed and, consequently, the demand for systemic support greatest, at the 3rd stage of education provided in lower secondary schools, i.e. directly preceding the second educational threshold. It is then, namely, that students make their first career decisions and opt either for vocational education or for continuing general education.

Currently, some tasks are performed by the Warsaw Centre for Educational and Social Innovations and Training (WCESIT). As an educational institution of the Capital City of Warsaw, the Centre provides training and organises conferences and courses for students, teachers, school heads, guidance counsellors, school psychologists, form teachers and parents. Career counselling, career disposition diagnoses and detailed information on Warsaw's secondary schools (both general education and basic/middle vocational schools) are provided by schools, psychological and pedagogical counselling centres in Warsaw, the WCESIT Career Counselling Development Centre, the Centre for Youth Information and Counselling in the Youth

Palace and the School Career Centre at the General Secondary and Economic Schools No 1. Similar assistance is also offered at numerous events which are held across Warsaw as part of, among others, the Entrepreneurship Day, the Polish National Career Week, the School of Entrepreneurship and the Perspectives education fairs.

Within the first two years, over ten training trips and stationary training courses were organised under the WCCS for WCCS coordinators from all institutions included in the system's support (Education Office, 2015). School-based coordinators, coordinators from psychological and pedagogical counselling centres and from education departments of borough offices participated in preparatory individual and group counselling workshops. During the over ten-hours workshops, they learned about modern methods of counselling, collecting occupational information and diagnosing predispositions, interests, expectations and needs of young people at different stages of education. The courses, including lectures, exercises, workshops and projects, were conducted by academic experts from, among others, the Maria Grzegorzewska University of Special Education in Warsaw, the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, the University of Łódź and the National Centre for Supporting Vocational and Continuing Education. Among the topics covered was working with students with specific learning difficulties, special educational needs and disabilities.

The Warsaw Career Counselling System works also outside educational facilities, launching projects at the intersection of education and the labour market and promoting cooperation between schools and their socio-economic environment. It organises trips to companies, meetings with professionals and practical classes at the Practical Education Centre. Additionally, the WCCS responds to the need to integrate operations and coordinate joint projects (EO, 2015).

Research on education and career counselling in schools

Within a few dozen years, the concept of counselling has changed considerably. Counselling and work pedagogy researchers insist that, prevalent in the 20th century, the belief in the value of one-time helping interventions should give way to modern visions of non-directive and processual counselling aimed to support individuals throughout life (see Kargulowa, 2005; Minta, 2012; Savickas, 2009). In her study, K. Karska (2013, p. 163) has found that teachers and heads of lower secondary schools still perceive counselling in the traditional way, i.e. as one-time events rather than long-term processes. They treat counselling as aid in choosing vocation and school, which is why they attach so much importance to vocational information and access to information on schools and educational tracts (*Ibid.*). The school staff mostly identify counselling with vocational information because, as Karska concludes, information is easily provided while the staff struggle with constraints

of time, organisation and HR (*Ibid.*, p. 165). The majority considered exploration of young people's dispositions and interests to be an extremely important function of counselling, thus embracing the traditional counselling model, referred to as directive counselling by A. Kargulowa (2005, p. 40). At the same time, given students' immaturity, teachers regard education and career counselling in lower secondary schools as little significant and preliminary only. Many teachers believe that the choices of lower secondary school students do not determine their future careers (in schools with a career centre the proportion drops by half). Some school heads share this opinion and articulate their position as follows: "They still have time to make important decisions, most of them go to a general education secondary school anyway, and they will make the decision there" (*Ibid.*, p. 165).

According to A. P. Czepiel (2013, p. 2), effective career guidance would contribute to increased interest in alternative education paths other than those involving a high school followed by a BA degree and more consistent with the current economic demands. The author points out that, even though proper legislation is in place, career counselling for the school youth in Poland is inadequate mainly because there are not enough full-time career counsellors. In 2011, only 1 000 out of almost 15 000 secondary schools employed a career counsellor.²

Given the shortage of full-time school-based career counsellors, services provided by teachers and form teachers are of particular importance (career counselling goals are included in core curricula). According to M. Wolan-Nowakowska, guidance and career counselling in schools should be embedded in schools' teaching and educational activities (2013, p. 109).

However, the obligation of all educators (subject teachers and specialist teachers such as guidance counsellors, school psychologists and speech and educational therapists) to support all students through education and career counselling is not always reflected in actual school practice. The failure was shown, for example, by a survey on teachers' working time and conditions published in June 2013 by the Educational Research Institute. The survey was administered to 4762 teachers of general education subjects from 921 schools for children and youth, at the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th stage of education (Federowicz, 2013). The survey covered 53 job-related activities performed by teachers other than subject-specific instruction, which as mandatory is common to all teachers. The job-related activities relevant to this discussion were represented by a universal category: education and career counselling. Among all the listed activities, this category turned out to be the least popular one, i.e. performed by the lowest proportion of the respondents. More than 95% of the surveyed teachers admitted that they had never engaged in education and career counselling activities. Importantly, the survey was conducted in the winter semester of 2012, that is, two years after the Regulation on organisation of psychological and

² The response issued by Tadeusz Sławecki, the Secretary of State at the Ministry of National Education, on 1 February 2013 to the parliamentary question posed by MP Jan Marek Warzecha on 23 January 2013.

pedagogical help (MNE,³ 2010) came into force, making this kind of support-provision mandatory to all teachers. Furthermore, the authors of the study established that the percentage was twice as high in lower secondary schools, which means that there are schools where any counselling is provided by fewer than 4% of teachers.

Since 2001 (MNE, 2001), secondary schools have been obligated to develop a school career counselling system and draft a policy document describing actions to take and those actually taken relative to school and career guidance and collecting and sharing information on careers and schools at the next stage of education. According to the report on the provision of counselling in 2012-2013 (ERI, 2015), only one third of Polish schools had their own SCS (school counselling system), and since the report included only the schools declared by their heads to provide educational and career counselling, the percentage of all schools that met the obligation over 10 years after it had been put in place did not exceed 33%. At the same time, more than 70% of teachers claimed that counselling services were promoted in their schools (Karska, 2013, p. 148).

Warsaw's schools stand out against the averaged data for entire Poland. The data of the Education Office for the Capital City of Warsaw (EO, 2015) show that, in June 2015, 65% of 378 schools in the Warsaw metropolitan area stated that they had drafted a policy document on the School Career Counselling System. In this sample, lower secondary schools represented the highest proportion at almost 89%, followed by secondary schools at 69%, technical secondary schools at 63%, basic vocational schools at 61.5% and the lowest-scoring primary schools at about 55%. It was established at the same time how many school websites had career counselling tabs. Out of the 378 schools, 162 had such tabs, which means that over 57% of schools neither shared information nor disseminated knowledge about counselling they provided. In terms of school types, information was shared most in lower secondary schools (62%) and least in general education secondary schools (36.5%). For other schools, the proportion did not exceed 40% (EO, 2015).

Defining the basic goals of counselling helps distinguish the key categories of research on education and career counselling.

Described in the following, my research focused on the work of school-based career counsellors and other people who help students prepare for decision-making at the second educational threshold, where the youth must make difficult choices (see Wojtasik, 2004) in transition from lower secondary school to general education or vocational secondary school.

³ MNE stands for the Ministry of National Education.

School-based career counselling coordinators' assessment of career counselling provision

The idea to study education and career counselling in lower secondary schools in the Capital City of Warsaw emerged in meetings with people responsible for counselling provision at schools and in informal conversations about daily counselling practice. Such people were contacted during training courses and conferences. What people responsible for implementing the model concepts said invited reflection on the functioning of the system solutions. Direct communication with school-based coordinators of the Warsaw Career Counselling System revealed their opinions about the realities of school career counselling. These generally spontaneous reflections encouraged an in-depth analysis of opinions of school-based career counselling coordinators. This informed the research project supervised by M. Wolan-Nowakowska and supported by the Maria Grzegorzewska University of Special Education. The study was conducted between June 2015 and May 2016 in public lower secondary schools in the Capital City of Warsaw. As all these schools were part of the Warsaw Career Counselling System, set up and supported by the Education Office for the Capital City of Warsaw, in each of them there was an individual responsible for education and career counselling provision who offered preparation for planning education paths and future vocational careers (exploring the existing study options rather than establishing whether they exists at all). The sample selection facilitated an in-depth analysis of the impact of school counselling on students' capacity to make informed education and career decisions consistent with their needs. The research relied on the mixed quantitative and qualitative framework and used a diagnostic survey (Pilch & Bauman, 2001). The questionnaire-based survey made it possible to collect interesting data, which, following an initial analysis, were partly verified and supplemented during in-depth interviews. The Education Office for the Capital City of Warsaw helped distribute the questionnaires among all the WCCS coordinators in Warsaw's 113 lower secondary schools. In response, 78 completed survey were received, which accounted for over 70% of the whole sample. Interviews were also conducted with selected counselling coordinators in Warsaw's lower secondary schools (8 people).

The study aimed to analyse in how far lower secondary school students were actually given preparation for planning their educational and professional careers and to identify obstacles to the implementation of the school career counselling system for students at the third stage of education. One of the objectives was to establish what the counsellors, teachers and other counselling-providing individuals actually did and did not do in terms of their mandatory duties defined in the education legislation.

The following detailed questions were therefore formulated: What are possible factors in the work of school-based counsellors? What are the attitudes of other

teachers to educational and career counselling tasks? How are counsellors and their work treated at schools?

In the survey, professional qualifications of counselling coordinators were established. The collected data indicate that nearly half of the respondents had no formal preparation for school career counselling. 52% of the WCCS coordinators had the required graduate or post-graduate qualifications as stipulated in the guidelines of the educational administration (National Centre for Supporting Vocational and Continuing Education/Krajowy Ośrodek Wspierania Edukacji Zawodowej i Ustawicznej [NCSVCE], 2008). The data are consistent with the findings of the WCCS organisers (EO, 2015), who used them to construct a relevant training offer. Unfortunately, counsellor qualifications cannot be obtained in qualification courses, which are, as a rule, a shorter certification path than university degrees.

Almost 30% of the coordinators are employed in schools as career counsellors. The remaining coordinators are employed as educators, school psychologists, subject teachers or specialist teachers (i.e. therapists, speech therapists, etc.), which means that counselling tasks are an additional part of their basic job description. Whatever their counsellor qualifications, the coordinators were asked about their professional experience. 44% did not have any professional experience other than in their current position. Interesting data were obtained on other settings in which the respondents had had work experience. 13% of the coordinators had once worked for a company or a corporation, 4% performed clerical work, 7% (had) worked in psychological and pedagogical counselling centres and 23% in various educational institutions and others. Almost 9% had their own business. This suggests that more than a half of the coordinators have no experience outside education. Only one in ten WCCS coordinators, who are after all supposed to promote entrepreneurial attitudes at school and prepare students for self-employment, can back up w their work with personal experience. Many coordinators have only theoretical knowledge about starting and running a business. The research indicated disproportions in the professional experience of the qualified and the unqualified coordinators. Almost 60% of the well-qualified WCCS coordinators have never had a job other than the one they currently hold. It means that the versatility of the WCCS coordinators' vocational experience decreases as their counselling qualifications increase. At the same time, as T. Kotarbiński (1965, pp. 138-145) has it in his praxeological framework, mastery in a profession requires displays of teamwork organisation skills and vocational proficiency acquired in practice and specialisation. These competencies, especially interpersonal ones, are strengthened and expanded in varied activities performed within diverse vocational tasks in various environments and in cooperation with different people and social groups. The teaching career was traditionally one of linear careers (see Kędzierska, 2011; Domecka & Mrozowicki, 2008). As a result of the labour market transformations, this linearity has been disrupted, like in business careers, and replaced with more mosaic-like patterns (*Ibid.*). However, the WCCS coordinators in our sample have rarely engaged in any entrepreneurial

activities such as starting their own business, self-employment, employing others and settling social insurance and taxation issues on their own. Thus, in praxeological terms, the coordinators of school education and career counselling are likely to be less efficient because of their poorer work experience.

The Regulation on psychological and pedagogical help of 2010 (MNE, 2010) defined new duties for specialist teachers employed at schools. Educators, speech therapists, therapists and re-education specialists must keep comprehensive documentation of the school-provided psychological and pedagogical assistance (see *Ibid.*; MNE, 2013). The same legislation made education and career counselling tasks mandatory for the entire teaching staff. Particularly extensive obligations were assigned to school-based career counsellors and, where there are none, to individuals appointed by school heads to perform educational and career counselling tasks. At the same time, research shows that various functions are, in many cases, performed by the same individual (EO, 2015; ERI, 2013), which is corroborated by the presented study. School counselling coordination is done by more than 52% of educators, 17% of psychologists and almost 16% of subject teachers, representing 10% of school subjects. In this context, it may be surprising that 42% of the respondents were not given a new position at school. One in four respondents (24%) believed that schools did not employ enough new counselling staff, and only 4% had their previous responsibilities reduced. Given this, it is not surprising that in the interviews and in written comments to some surveys the coordinators complained and expressed dissatisfaction, reiterating: "When am I supposed to do this [counselling]?"

The question about the perceived impact on counselling provision at schools yields quite optimistic answers. 85% of the respondents are convinced they have such impact. However, answers in more detailed categories paint a different picture. The coordinators were asked about non-regular activities, such as school trips. A trip of several hours, let alone several days, creates situations conducive to the development of interpersonal competences, building of self-knowledge and profound talks facilitating identification of students' career dispositions and interests. Such activities afford a unique occasion for counsellors or individuals performing counselling tasks (i.e. the WCCS coordinators) to do their job. The coordinators were asked whether they could co-design trip plans. More than a half (52%) of the respondents stated that they did not have any influence on the didactic and educational programs of trips.

Completing an educational project is an important event for lower secondary school students. The project method develops interpersonal competencies, fosters dutifulness, conscientiousness and responsibility and teaches project management and presentation skills (see Kotarba-Kańczugowska, 2010). Projects are mandatory for all lower secondary school students, usually in the second grade. Our findings suggests that nearly 27% of the respondents had no possibility to supervise students' educational projects. Participation in the projects affords coordinators an

opportunity to identify teenagers' interests and preferred behaviours under conditions of cooperation, dutifulness, time-limits and stress of speaking in public. The natural conclusion from the foregoing, namely that the remaining coordinators (73%) use this opportunity to perform counselling tasks, is not corroborated by practice.

Coordinators' responsibilities listed in the Regulation (MNE, 2013) include educating parents and the teaching staff. Our data show that 48% of the respondents do not organise counselling training for teachers though this corresponds to the obligations of coordinating and helping teachers in counselling-provision. At the same time, 43% of the coordinators believe that the pedagogical staff value their opinions moderately at best. In the interviews, the respondents stated that the work of the WCCS coordinators did not receive adequate acknowledgement. According to the responses, one of the main reasons for this is insufficient support of the school administration. The respondents were frustrated at a certain inconsequence: on the one hand, the school heads arbitrarily assigned counselling tasks to their employees, appointing them counsellors or people responsible for implementation of counselling tasks, while on the other hand, they neither gave the appointees a new position at school nor supported them in mastering the new role. "Interesting options for providing counselling are rife today, but it's all in the hands of the school head. If the school head doesn't value counselling, he won't put the coordinator on the board, won't introduce him to students, parents and other teachers, won't give him a separate office for privacy and confidentiality of individual counselling. And if the school head doesn't respect counselling, others won't either" (from an interview with a WCCS coordinator). Another problem in the relations with other school staff was the lack of information on counselling provided in classroom. This complaint concerned, above all, subject teachers, many of whom did not report to the coordinator. This was brought up by 29% of the coordinators, which indicates that teachers in almost one third of lower secondary schools did not provide psychological and pedagogical assistance, at the same time cutting off their school coordinators from important information on students' needs of educational and vocational planning.

35% of the counselling coordinators believe that their schools lack a clear counselling programme. In direct communications during interviews, the coordinators referred to solutions used in subject-teaching. They openly deplored the fact that there is neither a core curriculum for counselling nor specific syllabi which form an important point of reference for teachers. Some of the coordinators would like to work based on school education and career counselling programmes developed top-down, just as subject teachers do. In the interviews, the coordinators listed the most common ways of coping with the lack of a core curriculum and syllabi. They use, among others, education resources available at the NCSVCE and WCESIT websites. Besides intervention methods and forms, school-based counselling needs also relevant didactic and diagnostic aids, such as computers, tablets, printers,

software and tests. Yet 29% of the coordinators believe that their schools lack such teaching aids.

Conclusion

The study revealed a discrepancy between the model of education and career counselling stipulated in the educational legislation and policy documents and the actual practice of counselling provision in lower secondary schools. Clearly, although a necessary policy step has been made in assigning mandatory tasks to the counselling-providing WCCS coordinators, no effective measures have been put in place to ensure efficient work of individuals responsible for career counselling at schools. As the WCCS coordinators neither hold independent full-time positions nor have their previous work load reduced, they struggle with their coordination duties, which hinders the functioning of the entire school counselling system. Revealingly, WCCS coordinator positions seem to be held by randomly selected individuals. The compulsory and disproportionate nature of some nominations may raise doubts as to how seriously the matters of counselling are treated by lower secondary school heads. Our findings invite questions about how well the WCCS coordinators are actually prepared to perform their respective tasks. The previous studies emphasised the importance of having school career counsellor qualifications. The study reported in this article shifts the focus onto interpersonal competencies, which are relevant in all tasks entailing interaction with other school staff. The research also indicates that more detailed guidelines for education and career counselling provision in schools must be put in place and qualification and professional development opportunities for counsellors must be expanded.

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