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Disappointment, failure or change of life plans? Reasons for leaving upper secondary school by Polish young adults

Upper secondary education is seen as a minimum credential enabling further learning or training and as the foundation for successful labour market insertion. In Poland the percentage of youth who do not graduate on time, experience break in schooling, switch schools, programmes or leave education early is relatively small. However, this is an interesting group to investigate, because it can help us understand better the shortcomings of the education system and the ways in which young people in different educational situations might be supported in their school careers. Leaving school (whether permanently or temporarily) prolongs the length of education which generates higher costs both for the system and individuals. Therefore it is more beneficial that educational path is well-fitted to the expectations and needs of young people so they could finish the school of their first choice.

The paper presents various reasons for leaving education declared by young people who decided to (temporarily or permanently) quit schooling at the upper secondary school level. We focus on the individual perception and the way in which young people explain the decision to stop their education distinguishing between push and pull reasons.

We used data from a longitudinal research project *From School to Work* run between 2009 and 2014 by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. In 2014, 4,369 participants aged 20–23 answered a questionnaire allowing a reconstruction of their educational and professional history since the end of lower secondary school.

Less than 7% of respondents (N=343) left upper secondary school at least once. Majority of them continued education in another school at the same level. 68% of those youth were pulled out of school, mostly because of getting a job, for family reasons or due to the need to change the school/programme type (e.g. from general to vocational). 23% of those who decided to leave school did it because of push reasons (such as problems with learning or passing the grade, dissatisfaction with the school they attended). In 9% of cases both push and pull reasons were present.

We can observe different reasons for leaving school depending on educational paths. People who first graduated from one upper secondary school and later left another one indicated, first of all, getting a job as a reason for their decision. That was the main reason also among those who quitted school and did not achieve education at ISCED3 level (early school leavers). But these young people also quite often indicated other push and pull reasons. Among those who have been switching upper secondary schools but in the end achieved the education at upper

secondary school level push reasons such as learning difficulties were dominant. Gender also differentiates that picture.

The results show that, on the one hand, the flexible learning opportunities enabling to reconcile work and school should be implemented on the system level. On the other hand, the comprehensive support measures which include educational, emotional and social support should be available at schools to address the complex needs of young people. The results also indicate the need to improve the scope of counseling available at schools. Possibility of using professional support in further career planning at earlier stages of education would allow young people to make more adequate and better-informed choices, to prevent unnecessary changes and perturbations on their path to obtain ISCED 3 qualifications.