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Youth and school – about partially separated systems

A B S T R A C T : This study refers to one of the basic paradigms of holistically understood modern science – the system approach. The article presents my own research experiences concerning youth, school and other elements of the educational environment. It indicates the significance of the research on youth for pedagogy and other social sciences and the role of various elements of the educational environment, including school, in forming the identity of young people. Presented against the background of the results of my own quantitative and qualitative research (life orientations of young people, choice of ideals, choice of life path, importance attributed to different elements of the educational environment in the formation of knowledge about themselves and the world) is the social isolation of youth and school. It is indicated that the essence of education lies in mutual relations between different systems (not only between youth and school), flows of values, emotions, information, energy, only then the proper mechanism of the process of education can be seen.

K E Y W O R D S : Youth, school, educational environments, partially separated systems.

Preliminary remarks

It is not difficult to explain the research interest in the youth. The research on youth makes it possible to think about this group, among others, in terms of a force entering the current of social transformations and giving it a specific character resulting from generational characteristics, a direction, as well as an indicator of social changes allowing to forecast social chances for maintaining favorable relations between continuity and social change (Mannheim 2011; Griese 1996; Górniewicz 1999; Leppert 2002; Melosik 2005). The importance of youth was noticed and is widely recognized. In his poem entitled *Do Kajetana Koźmiana (To Kajetan Koźmian)*, Zygmunt Krasiński, one of the

three bards, the greatest poets of Polish Romanticism, wrote: "Youth my master is a sculptor, Who shapes the entire life; Though it passes quickly, Her chisel leaves a permanent mark". The importance of developmental achievements of the phase of adolescence for further human development and quality of life is stressed in the social psychology of development. Sociologists are elevating the importance of the young generation for the society, economists for the economy. The development of youth pedagogy, which revises and synthesizes knowledge on youth as a subject of pedagogical research (youth in the center of pedagogy) and as a subject of prospective changes (youth in the center of social change), is progressing (Cybal-Michalska 2006; 2013; Cybal-Michalska et al. 2017).

In the modern world of risk, ambivalence, liquidity, access, networks, media, but also large opportunities, one should notice the difficulties in adapting and functioning of young people (Beck 2012; Castells 2010; Thomson 2001; Rifkin 2003; Szkudlarek 1999; Goban-Klas 2009). Social and civilization changes further complicate the situation of young people, causing confusion, social pathologies, excessive individualism and the disappearance of community ties. In view of this state of affairs, paying attention to the pedagogical, social, cultural and economic conditions of the shaping of youth identity, including showing the role of school education as one that should open to young people the horizons of humanistic, culturally diverse reality, create situations conducive to self-reflection, develop the ability to solve problems, make decisions is important from the cognitive point of view and useful from the point of view of social practice.

Theoretical assumptions and methodology of own research

In this study I refer to one of the basic paradigms of contemporary science, understood as a whole – to the systems approach (Bertalanffy 1984). It is most fully used in biology (treating living organisms as organized entities of a dynamic character called "open systems"), but this theory is also applied in the exact sciences and humanities. Years ago an attempt to apply the system approach to research on the structure of man on the grounds of Polish philosophical anthropology was made by Roman Ingarden. For him, man "is a kind of a complex of connected systems – body, psyche and spirit – having a personal self – a partially isolated system". (Ingarden 1987, p. 124). As stated by E. Wołoszyn (1997), regardless of Ingarden's critical remarks on Bertalanffy's theory, this is a serious attempt to apply the systems approach in Polish philosophical anthropology.

The systems approach was used by Florian Znaniecki (1973, Vol. 1, 2). Although its systemic approach is quite far from the contemporary systems

theory, it still inspires analyses of the educational process. This author treated the basic social arrangements as systems, separated and internally coherent systems of components having internal structure and holistic functions. The closed systems distinguished by Znaniecki are in fact open systems, i.e. "remaining in many relations and flows of information content, energy, etc. between them and the surrounding environment" (Szczepański 1973, Vol. 1, p. X).

School is one of the elements of the educational environment, which according to Znaniecki consists of several arrangements: early educational environment (family, neighborhood, peer groups); educational institutions; institutions of indirect education; other influences (Znaniecki 1973, Vol. 1). A holistic approach to school allows for the separation of groups/arrangements that have an internal structure and holistic functions. From a system perspective, the school is an open, dynamic and separated system (Znaniecki 1973, Vol. 1, pp. 176–199). It is one of the components of the socio-educational, socio-institutional and cultural environment (for more information see: Schulz 1993; Rodziewicz 2003; Śliwerski 2008; 2012; Pilch 1999; 2000; 2012; Surzykiewicz et al. 2010; Kwieciński 2012; Mieszalski 2014, pp. 57-68; Szczurek-Boruta 2014, pp. 285–302). It is an environment where between specific arrangements such as teachers, students, non-pedagogical staff and parents there is a possibility of the flow of information, values, emotions, an environment that creates conditions for intergenerational cooperation. The school occupies a specific place in society and plays a specific role (Szczepański 1989). It provides children and young people with appropriate – selected according to their developmental needs and the components of symbolic culture – components of collective experience. The specificity of the school in terms of its activity and the nature of the processes that take place there is determined by: a particular category of people it deals with (the teenage generation in a specific age bracket) and the purpose of its activity, i.e. shaping the personalities of young people, instilling them with socially desirable patterns of behavior, enriching their behavior.

In this study I refer to the empirical material obtained during the research conducted among the youth living in the Silesian Voivodeship, in the area characterized by intensive economic development, conducted in the school year 2016/2017[1]. In this research the strategy of quantitative (survey)

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[1] In this elaboration I refer to the partial results of broader research presented in the paper: A. Szczurek-Boruta: *Zadania rozwojowe i edukacja szkolna młodzieży. Stałość i zmienność (Developmental tasks and school education of youth. Stability and variability)*, Wydawnictwo Adam marszałek, Toruń 2019. The results mentioned in this article have not been analyzed earlier in the perspective adopted in this study.

and qualitative (interview) research (Pilch, Bauman 2001) was applied, a given variable (declared identity behaviors) was measured with the author's questionnaire of the survey of development tasks and social conditions of education, based on the theory of psychosocial development by Erik Erikson, the concept of development tasks by Robert Havighurst and the Theory of Identity Behaviors by Tadeusz Lewowicki, sociological theories of conflict (see Szczurek-Boruta 2019, in print, annex). The study covered a representative sample of 248 people (112 women and 136 men, 185 students of technical high schools and 63 students of general high schools). The tested sample was selected using the random-deliberate method. The deliberate elements were: age of students – 18, type of school – general and vocational high school), place of residence – Silesian Voivodeship. The empirical data were compiled using descriptive statistics (Ferguson, Takane 2004).

In these considerations, I focus on selected aspects of the functioning of youth. Developmental tasks and life orientations refer to the same scope of human activity, they differ in the degree of precision and detail of the contents they include (see Szczurek-Boruta 2007, pp. 41–43). Developmental tasks are social expectations to which an individual gives individual content (Havighurst 1981), and orientations are a system of life goals and means of their realization which is a fundamental subjective element of the way of life (Hejnicka-Bezwińska 1991, p. 27). Seeing the links between developmental tasks and life orientations, in the context of the results of research on development tasks and social conditions of school education, I will present the state and conditions of shaping life orientations of youth and indicate the obligations of school education in terms of their formation and activation.

It is not a coincidence that empirical research on orientations is clearly situated in the context of the research on youth, because it can be treated as an indicator, and at the same time as a condition and effect of the existence of sense of life in the consciousness of a young person, as the best indicator of all changes. In pedagogy, life orientations can be considered as a measure of the effectiveness of the educational environment (Reykowski et al. 1990; Hejnicka-Bezwińska 1991; Szymański 2000; Cybal-Michalska 2006; 2013; Cudowska 2014).

Important for the undertaken research work is to find out: what are the life orientations of young people and what are their conditions? What conditions for the development of life orientations of young people are created by the educational environment, including school?

Life orientations of youth – results of the research

Adopting the position of Teresa Hejnicka-Bezwińska, I put my pedagogical research on life orientations in the context of Erikson's developmental stages. According to Erikson (1994; 2004), the identity of an adolescent develops on several basic levels, including the choice of ideals, the choice of a life path that enables them to define themselves and adapt to social requirements. The individual relies on elements that have emerged as new qualities of *ego* in previous crises. The integration of these elements takes place during the moratorium period, i.e. the integration of these elements takes place during the moratorium period, i.e. the so-called programmed delay inscribed both in the innate development scheme and in the social status and cultural customs. Adolescents during the moratorium period should choose ideals that are close to their hearts and reject those that they do not accept. This is a prerequisite for defining oneself in an ideological sense.

High school is an educational environment that determines the model of pedagogical activities in a cultural context, gives time necessary to practice and master developmental tasks, extends the development moratorium, prepares for general education and study, and postpones the decision to take up professional employment. The adolescent generation uses the time they have been given to overcome the crisis typical of the adolescent phase (characteristics of selected problems of the functioning of youth in the works by: Fatyga 2005; Leppert et al. 2005; Czerepaniak-Walczak 2007; Szafraniec 2012; Brzezińska 2017). They wait with the fulfillment of development tasks, with the achievement of a mature identity (Szczurek-Boruta 2007; 2019). The society, by sanctioning the forms of prolonged school education (through successive reforms of education), allows to wait out the period of uncertainties, but does it provide opportunities for development and better preparation for functioning in it? Does it not forget that too long an institutional and cultural moratorium may lead to distortions in the shaping of identity (negative identity as defined by J. Marcia)?

The results of the own research indicate that 50% of the surveyed youth are convinced that the school creates opportunities to search for their own ideology, teachers give their consent to the choice of ideals. School education will, to some extent, prepare some of the pupils to develop their own concept of themselves, their own idea of life, to adopt a value orientation. The majority of young people (77%) declare openness to other people and helpfulness towards them; 63% of the respondents make tolerance, understanding other people

and being kind to them the motto of their lives. Young people declare their readiness to act constructively in line with humanistic values, to recognize human beings and their development as the highest value. At the same time, they also consider materialistic values (money, car, home) (75%), rivalry and competition (66.4%) and perfectionism (60.4%) important. The mentioned results speak about the effects of upbringing, which are situated in individual systems of values of pupils, value orientation, and more broadly identity. The future will show, and everyday life will verify to what extent the declarations of youth will translate into specific behaviors and social activities.

The choice of life path in the context of social expectations and individual values can be associated with personal standards, orientations, life plans. In important decisions in life, as in other decisions, it is necessary to recognize the situation as a whole and to treat it as a "decision-making situation". In psychology, the concept of orientation appears in the context of the analysis of human activity, as an axial component of mentality containing hidden normative assumptions (Reykowski et al. 1990, p. 16). In terms of pedagogy, life orientation is "an indicator of the state of consciousness of the young generation, which provides grounds for forecasting trends in preferences and choices made by young people in various areas of their current and future activity". (Hejnicka-Bezwińska 1991, p. 5), it determines the content of the life plan as its genetically prior component (Hejnicka-Bezwińska 1991, p. 34). Visions of the future life, career plans and goals are indicative for the individual and society as a whole. The results of the research indicate that nearly half of the respondents intend to study after graduating from school. These are mainly students of high schools with general education profile. 41% of respondents, mainly students of vocational high schools, intend to combine work and studying.

The situation on the labor market in the life environment of the analyzed youth is good. According to CSO data from 2016, "the Silesian Voivodeship in comparison with other voivodeships is characterized by: one of the lowest values of the unemployment rate, the highest number of job offers, the lowest number of registered unemployed per 1 job offer". (Unemployment 2016). This fact is noticed by young people who positively assess the possibilities of finding a job in the region. Nevertheless, they postpone their decision to take up employment and extend their development moratorium. The professional plans of youth are described as consistent and well-established. For nearly 60% of the respondents, the choice of high school was associated with plans for the future, it was conscious and thoughtful. The school-focused activity of youth and high self-esteem are important determinants of life plans. In this

situation, the educational environments should not hinder young people in the realization of already defined plans, but should help the remaining, large group in making decisions on choosing further life path.

The course of socialization to date, the sense of identity shaped during childhood, have a decisive impact on the quality of life of a young person during adolescence (see: Meeus, Wied 2007, s. 131–147; Ponterotto, Park-Taylor 2007, pp. 282–294)[2]. The determinants of well-being are on the one hand – content and values taken from the cultural circle in which young people live (in the Upper Silesian culture, family, place of life, work, material values, openness and tolerance have been and are valued for centuries), and on the other hand – new content and values, filtered and assimilated from high culture, popular culture and media.

Young people declare that they draw the knowledge about themselves and about the world, values and behavioral patterns mainly from their families (74%), media (55%), and peer groups (53%), and the least importance is assigned to teachers (30%). It can be assumed that as a result of solving the first development crisis, the respondents developed a need to trust themselves and others, hence the young people are looking for people and ideas they can believe in and at the same time want to be trustworthy. The quality of the identification offer that a young person encounters and has at their disposal decides about the shape of the forming identity. Objects of identification, people who inspire respect among young people and constitute role models are: parents (64%); musical idols, literary heroes, sportsmen, bloggers (40%); colleagues (26%), teachers (21%).

The family gives young people economic protection and a sense of security in an uncertain situation. It is a point of reference for the forming of identity. Parents provide role models, are the object of identification for the majority of respondents. The family continues to be an important environment of human development and socialization. In it, the individual "in a natural and unrestricted way shapes their humanity, at the same time learning to function properly in the surrounding world". (Kazubowska 2010, p. 137). The research conducted so far on the functioning of the family in Upper Silesia shows that the family holds a special place in the life of the inhabitants of this region. It provides models of family, social and neighborly life. It is the source of tradition

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[2]   Research conducted in the years 1976–2007 indicates that the resources with which a child enters the period of adolescence are the most important factors in the formation of the identity of adolescents (Meeus, Wied 2007, p. 131–147, Ponterotto, Park-Taylor 2007, p. 282––294).

and the environment of value transmission. It has been and still is a factor in the shaping of identity in childhood and youth. In many cases, it is the place where positive intergenerational relations are formed (Błaszczak-Wacławik et al. 1990; Bazielich 1995; Lipok-Bierwiaczonek 1994; Bukowska-Floreńska 2007; Świątkiewicz 1992; 2010; Szczepański 1999; Szczurek-Boruta 2003, pp. 73––84; Janeczek, Szczepański 2006). The family shaped and developed in a child not only the sense of inherited identity, which grows with the interiorization of behaviors, social attitudes and values, but above all introduced them into the process of acquiring personal, social identity by means of creative self-acceptance, which demands from an individual mature choices and a sense of own suitability.

Significant, in the context of the results of own research, is the role of widely understood culture disseminated by the media. Culture is a creator and a determinant of fashion: appearance, lifestyle, taste, ways of spending free time, provides an identification offer. Today's youth is immersed in popular culture conveyed by the media (television, Internet, music, youth magazines), which transmit values, in an open or hidden way, and give them a place in the private hierarchy of values of youth. One can agree with Zbyszko Melosik, who believes that popular culture can be treated as a conveyor belt of values, which in this respect replaces school (2013, p. 36). This author writes: "Young people attending modern schools, regardless of their class background and parents' education, usually do not appreciate high cultural practices (museum, opera or poetry). Popular culture is the source of both the construction of identity and the creation of "significant meanings". […] it is a powerful factor in the formation of intra-group relationships […] adequate and competent participation in the pop-cultural practices preferred by the group determines to a large extent the place of the individual in the group structure, their acceptance by the group or their marginalization. Thus, popular culture is – at least at the micro level – a powerful stratification factor. This is related to the fact that the individual adopts the lifestyle preferred by the group, especially in areas such as music, fashion, sport and leisure activities or online activity" (Melosik 2013, p. 34).

An integral and valued by young people part of cultural capital is connected with popular culture or omnivorousness. The category of *omnivores*, next to univores, whose style and taste are homogenous and confined, focus on popular culture, ignoring the high one, is present in the concept of Richard A. Peterson, Robert M. Kern, attempting to explain the relationship between the class position and participation in culture (Melosik 2013, p. 38). The cultural practices preferred by omnivores are internally diverse lifestyle, mobility and

openness. Youth is cosmopolitan, participates in high culture practices and incorporates into their lives the components of popular culture.

The youth under research are representatives of generation Z (Generacja Z 2015). They were born in a world already dominated by technology, are unable to live without the Internet, "the borderline between the virtual and the real world is blurring, they value close friends and social media friends equally highly". (Generations X, Y, Z 2019). Numerous international studies (Aichner, Jacob 2015, pp. 257–275) show that young people are addicted to social media, e.g. to Facebook (adolescents in Poland account for almost 2/3 of Facebook users [Sadowski 2018]); various types of blogs, microblogs, discussion forums, or portals enabling publishing and sharing texts, photos, videos and social games.) Researchers report negative consequences of addiction to smartphones and iPhones (low level of social skills, poor relationships with other people, lower level of empathy and understanding of the conversation partner) (Carr 2017). A human needs another human to function effectively. Young people, as network users and members of virtual communities, become prisoners of virtual space and struggle with direct relations. This situation generates serious threats to their functioning (loneliness, mental crisis, depression, suicide) and is a challenge for psychologists, therapists and pedagogues. Building interpersonal relations has never been an important task of the school, but rather an area that is left out for young people to develop (Szczurek-Boruta 2007). Therefore, it is time to take up this task.

Patterns and experiences connected with participation in a group, direct and long-term contacts, bonds, loyalty to individuals and groups provide the basis for development and achievement of social identity. Peer group is an important developmental environment. The roles assumed by the adolescent in the group, norms and rules prevailing there, values, lifestyle shared with peers condition the process of forming identity.

Among the people who are considered important for young people, apart from their parents, famous representatives of popular culture and colleagues, there are also teachers. Their role is difficult and complicated – they provide young people with knowledge, but also with the pressure they need during this period, thanks to them it is possible, at least at the high school level, to continue the educational career of young people. In the period of adolescence there is an increase in conflicts with teachers, and their source is the demand of young people for certain privileges, exemption from the rules that have been imposed so far, and disagreement with the current order. Young people looking for models and authorities treat teachers as a source of inspiration and models, but as the results of the aforementioned research show, this role

is small in relation to the importance given by young people to their parents, colleagues, media and cultural figures. This issue will not be discussed, as it requires further research.

Final remarks

Youth is a group looking for identification, their place in the social structure. In the absence of clear answers to the posed existential questions, in the culture of contradiction, the necessity of constant adaptation (Melosik 2013), the primacy of individualism over collectivism (Cybal-Michalska 2006; 2013), the lack of involvement resulting from the erosion of social capital (March-Holka 2016, pp. 226–240), the solution of natural developmental tasks by this group is more than ever before accompanied by many difficulties.

The phenomena outlined in this text, and even more so their interpretations, should be read as preliminary and mainly hypothetical answers to the problem contained in the title of this essay.

The task of education is to give perspective, personal, but also non-personal, future-oriented tasks, to create situations for self-reflection, developing the ability to solve problems and make decisions. The results of education in terms of choice of ideology and life orientation emerge from an entire mosaic of intended (educational) and unintended (environmental) influences. If we add to these influences the subject's own activity (self-development), immersion in culture and the whole combination of historical, geographical, social and economic conditions, both the final result of the influences as well as the influences themselves become something intangible, immeasurable, but it does not mean that it is impossible to recognize, describe and evaluate.

The ideas of Znaniecki concerning a closed system are very relevant and useful in discussions on youth and modern school. This author mentioned social isolation in a special context. "Social isolation consists in a certain degree of lack of understanding and mutual interaction and opposition to an intentional commonality of experiences and activities" (Znaniecki 1973, Vol. 1, p. 40). The lack of understanding and mutual interaction, commonality of experiences and activities between systems is not conducive to education because, as Znaniecki wrote, "the pedagogue does not shape an isolated personality, but specific social systems". (Szczepański 1973, Vol. 1, p. XI). I am deeply convinced that the essence of education lies in mutual relations between different systems (not only between youth and school), flows of values, emotions, information, energy, only then the proper mechanism of the process of education can be seen.

Modern school has retained the character of a partially separated system, and this separation is strengthened and maintained. In the face of such state of affairs, a question arises: is it worth to keep the school in its present sense – a separated group, when young people are subjected to ever stronger influence of other systems? Shouldn't school curricula – pedagogical programs – include, foresee these influences, study their effects, organize activities most beneficial for the realization of educational tasks? After all, school has a clear relationship with other systems involved in creating conditions for increasing the level of life satisfaction of youth. It provides impulses that encourage young people to become active and assume social roles. The education gained there is an element of human cultural capital for the entire life.

The image of visions and ideas determining the directions of school development is subject to constant change. A constant element of this image is youth and desires associated with humanistic education, conducive to their development and self-fulfillment, with civic education, shaping the ability to act for the benefit of other people, community, society. School, while performing its tasks, cannot remain alone in its activity. School, while performing its tasks, cannot remain alone in its activity. Its educational successes are connected with and depend to a large extent on the knowledge of influencing the young generation and other elements of the educational environment, as well as on the competence and ability to attract these groups, systems as partners in the process of education.

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