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Rationality of school education from the perspective of its participants' epistemological interests

In contemporary education policies, school education is mainly perceived from the perspective of its effects, i.e. in terms of a process aimed at achieving measurable results. However, the aim of the project “Rationality of school education from the perspective of its participants’ epistemological interests” was to analyse school education from the perspective of its internal logic (called rationality) assigned to education by its participants - students, parents and teachers. Rationality is a form of validation of education, it facilitates the identification of its sense and the sense of competences transferred within its scope. Rationality of education is conditioned by specific epistemological interests (cognitive interests) of students, parents and teachers. These interests not only reflect an individual attitude of a specific individual towards education but also - very importantly - social awareness of the group in which that individual is rooted.

We have identified four types of rationality: praxeological, hermeneutic, emancipatory and negative. Praxeological rationality has a technological nature and is oriented at practical skills, it allows to achieve measurable results. Hermeneutic rationality has an existential and interpretative nature and is oriented at gaining understanding of oneself and the world. Emancipatory rationality has a critical nature and is oriented at empowerment and self-determination of an individual as well as critical analysis of social reality from the point of view of emancipatory interests (inasmuch as social interests facilitate the emancipation of an individual). Negative rationality is connected to rejecting the sense of education as such or in its hitherto forms known to the individual concerned.

The project included: 1) a theoretical analysis of rationality on the grounds of critical theory and hermeneutics, as well as pedagogies developed on their basis, 2) qualitative research of education policy, 3) empirical qualitative research in the form of focus group interviews and in-depth individual interviews, and 4) empirical quantitative research by means of a Rationality of Education Questionnaire (REQ), specially designed for this purpose.

The empirical research was carried out by a specialist company (Millward Brown) on the basis of materials supplied by us. The empirical qualitative research was carried out in 2013. It involved 21 IDIs (7 students, 7 teachers, 7 parents) and 8 FGIs (4 student groups, 2 teacher groups and 2 parent groups). The quantitative research was carried out in 2014 on a Poland-wide, representative sample of upper-secondary school students (N=2810), and in addition on teachers (N=321) and parents (N=2676).

Results of the main quantitative research using the Questionnaire can be summarized in three points. Firstly, factor analyses justify the statement that in the case of students we see a reconstruction of the predicted four-factor structure of perceived rationales of education and obligations of a school. We are dealing with clear factors of a hermeneutic, a praxeological and a negative rationality. The emancipatory rationale factor was less definite, and therefore lead to problems with its interpretation. On one hand, it included the belief in obligations of schools as regards teaching independence and raising awareness, on the other hand however, it was not far from some statements close to the praxeological discourse with a technical orientation. The emancipatory rationality was essentially conditioned by a lower socio-economic status. Secondly, there was a very strong (even overwhelming if we considered the effect size) domination of the praxeological rationality among all students. It means that students expect that schools and education will provide them with practical, narrowly useful skills and competences rather than support characteristics connected to the remaining rationales. The following ranks in this hierarchy were taken by the hermeneutical, the emancipatory and the negative rationality. Thirdly, distributional analysis of variations of each rationale confirms their social origin. Although the majority of variations is located at the individual level, rationales are not just individual phenomena - on the contrary - the fact that between several and over a dozen percent of variations can be assigned to the division into groups of schools and classes, shows that the processes of their development can have a social origin. It is an empirical confirmation of the assumptions of critical theory, which perceived epistemological interest as a social category.

Based on the entire study, one can state that 1) analyses of educational policies showed a marginalisation of the hermeneutic and the emancipatory rationality of education, 2) the empirical qualitative research allowed to reconstruct the semantics of perceiving education, 3) the empirical quantitative research showed the existence of four kinds of perceiving the rationale of education, with a dominant position of praxeological rationality, and a relationship

between the perception of rationality and social contexts - social awareness; it means that the attribution of rationality of education is not only the result of an individual attitude, but also of cognitive interest as a state of awareness of a social group.