

The Eurasia Proceedings of Educational & Social Sciences (EPESS), 2023

Volume 33, Pages 40-46

**IConSE 2023: International Conference on Science and Education**

## **Self-Reflection on the Meaningfulness of Vocational Students' Lives and Their Expectations from the Future in the Context of Demanded Quality**

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**Abstract:** Vocational education has a special and irreplaceable place in the educational system of each country. On its quality depends continuous transition of graduates into the world of labour. The article analyses the research, organized for students of secondary vocational schools. The ambition of the research was to find a mutual intersection of two levels of life of young people - students of secondary vocational schools. The first level examines how young people evaluate the meaning of their lives, how they perceive their future, the goals of life and its direction through the scale of subjective attitudes. The second level analyses the students' opinion of their readiness for the labour market, as vocational training naturally reflects on the world of labour and consistently cooperates with it. Students are regularly confronted with the real world of labour during vocational education. What role do teachers play in this confrontation? Is the measure of professionalism, sensitivity and promptness of teachers a sufficient guarantee of quality transition of vocational education graduates to the world of labour? Or, are the students exposed to media pressure, information and communication technologies and social networks in which teachers do not have a clearly defined positive role? How do the students themselves evaluate their level of preparedness or qualifications for labour performance after their studies? The real quality of vocational education only the future will check. However, the analysis of contemporary opinions of students can be a significantly positive stimulus for the future.

**Keywords:** Vocational education students, Life expectations, Teaching methods, Quality of education

### **Introduction**

*To see me does not necessarily mean to see my face.  
To understand my thoughts is to have seen me.*

*Mustafa Kemal*

Vocational education has a special and irreplaceable place in the educational system of every country. The continuous transition of graduates into the world of work depends on its quality. Vocational education, on the one hand, is based on the pillars of general and vocational-theoretical education, on the other hand, it is its natural outcome, with the fact that it reflects on the world of work and consistently cooperates with it.

The vocational education system logically and meaningfully carries out the specific and non-specific transfer of theoretical education to the world of work - not only through practical exercises, workshop teaching, laboratory and design exercises, but above all through the implementation of professional practice. Professional practice is realized in the real world of production and work. The world of work is a necessary feedback for vocational training. The future professional life of graduates of vocational education in the world of work and their meaningful application in professional life depends to a large extent on the quality of professional practice carried out within the entire study process. The level of sensitivity and alertness with which vocational

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- Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the Conference

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education is able to respond to developments in the world of work will be reflected in the quality or poor quality of future professionals. And none of us doubts the need for qualified professionals.

In the present time, which is characterized by rapid changes in science, technology and society, the role of professional education is increasingly necessary. Only the future will check the quality of education, therefore forecasts of developments in the world of work as a whole as well as in individual professions and on the labour market are very important for professional education. The content of the curriculum and teaching methods must be adapted to what the graduates will need when transitioning from the world of education to the world of work and when applying in it. Education must provide them not only with immediately applicable knowledge and skills, but also such equipment that will not allow them to remain at the level of development achieved, will allow them to further their education, develop their skills, know how to solve problems.

Contact with the world of work, which should lead to the acquisition of adequate abilities and skills, is a professional matter and cannot be ensured to the necessary extent only by schools as part of their teaching. Therefore, teaching at secondary vocational schools is carried out in two parallel areas - in the theoretical preparation of pupils and in vocational training. The result of the mutual symbiosis of these two levels is the coordination of the theoretical and practical components in such a way as to ensure the growth of manual skills and related professional knowledge. The added value for students is the gradual learning of the world of work, its economic indicators, as well as its organization, planning and management.

Therefore, teaching at secondary vocational schools is carried out in two parallel areas – in the theoretical preparation of pupils and in vocational training. The result of the mutual symbiosis of these two levels is the coordination of the theoretical and practical components in such a way as to ensure the growth of manual skills and related professional knowledge. The added value for students is the gradual learning of the world of work, its economic indicators, as well as its organization, planning and management.

A meaningful system from a human, but also an economic point of view, is only such a system in which changes are taking place and which has its own internal dynamics. A system can be defined as a whole composed of several parts arranged in a certain way. A characteristic element is the direct connection of these forms of education:

- theoretical education
- general education,
- vocational education,
- practical preparation of pupils.

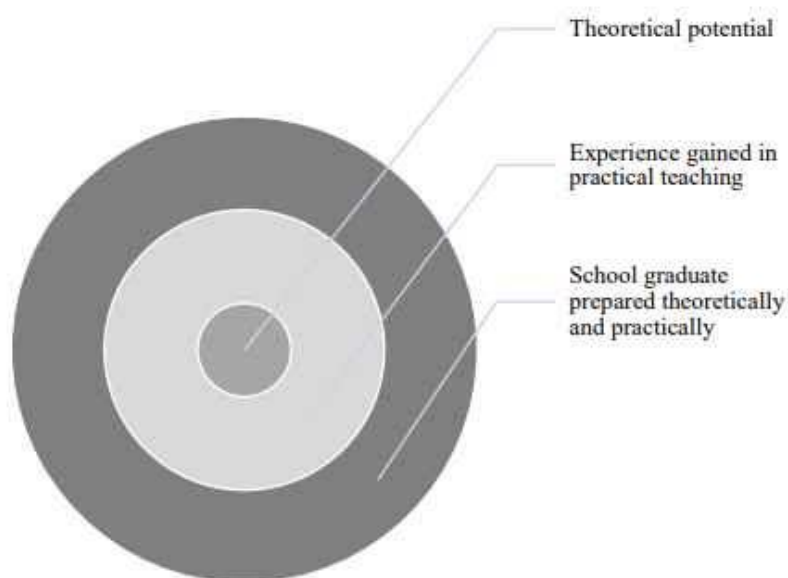


Figure 1. A typical element of vocational education is practical teaching, which takes place in the premises of the company - a possible future employer. This method guarantees that the training of students will be sufficiently satisfactory for the employer. Pupils can thus familiarize themselves directly with the future workplace, the way of working, technologies and customary work procedures.

Schools involved in the vocational education system cooperate with private companies and together set educational programs and curricula. The meaningfulness of such vocational training lies primarily in its connection to the current needs of the labour market. The vocational education system itself can be set up and implemented in teaching and study fields at all levels of education. The basic condition is to set the system in such a way that the minimum number of hours of practical training is observed in proportion to the overall total scope of teaching. The minimum scope is defined by sample lesson plans.

The main aim of our contribution is to use qualitative research to examine the strategies of vocational education, to identify factors affecting the course of activities at the relevant workplace. At the same time, seek an answer to the question of how best get feedback and assess the degree of effectiveness and meaningfulness of the work, so that the aims of vocational education can be fulfilled.

## **Method**

The conceptual apparatus of scientific disciplines has been expanded in recent decades not only by quantitative but also by qualitative research. Quantitative research works with a large sample of respondents, hypotheses are statistically verified at the level of significance with justifiable validity and reliability. The scientific community of social-scientific disciplines is subjecting the world of numbers and quantification to criticism more and more urgently. The main argument is criticism towards the choice of dependent and independent variables, influencing numerical interpretations by unpredictable factors (intelligence, delinquency, etc.), weak or no contact with people or with the "research field" and, last but not least, hypothesis testing with statistical logic. The argumentation about the inappropriateness of quantitative research in social science disciplines is presented below.

### **Qualitative Methods**

The main characteristic of quantitative methods are:

- suitable more for natural sciences;
- distortion of "measurable" phenomena by unreliable concepts;
- inappropriately interpreted correlations;
- result in quick fixation – no contact with people or terrain;
- no contact with people or terrain;
- inappropriately defined dependent and independent variables;
- testing of hypothesis affected.

Compared to quantitative research, the strength of qualitative research lies more in extensive, descriptive narratives than in the creation of statistical tables. Qualitative research is primarily characterized by "immersing oneself in the problem", it does not work with a large number of respondents, it can often solve the case study of only one respondent within the framework of a qualitative research problem, while the validity and reliability of the research will be preserved if the research is set up correctly. The criteria for evaluating qualitative research are listed in the following table.

Table 1. Characteristics of qualitative methods

Evaluation criteria of qualitative research
Are the research methods appropriate to the nature of the question we are asking?
Can we clearly identify connections with existing knowledge or theories?
Was data collection and description of records carried out systematically?
Does the sensitivity of the method meet the needs of the research question?
Are the criteria used in case selection, data collection and analysis clearly described?
Does the research refer to accepted analytical procedures?
Is the analysis systematic?
Is there an appropriate discussion of how themes, concepts and categories were derived from the data as part of the research?
Does an appropriate discussion of the evidence for and against the researcher's claims form part of the research?
Are the data clearly distinguishable from their interpretation?

## **Results and Discussion**

After the consultation and finalization, the following questions were the subject of guided interviews with the school management:

1. How do you evaluate the results of your professional practice so far?
2. What is in your opinion the most effective tool in vocational practice?
3. What is in your opinion the weakest element in vocational practice?
4. How should (could) the existing competences of the school, or superior bodies expand so that the entire process of organizing vocational practice improves ?
5. Who and according to what criteria decides on the selection of training workplace for vocational practice?

Qualitative research revealed a clear picture of the functioning of vocational practice in schools - practice that takes place year-round in a proportional connection of theoretical and practical teaching week after week appears to be significantly more meaningful. Vocational practice, which takes place as a continuous, uninterrupted period of several weeks to months, is significantly more characterized by an ambiguous definition of goals, the moment of control and feedback is formal, indefinite and clouded by a long time interval. Schools have to rely only on their management when carrying out vocational practice, national support is proclaimed only on a theoretical level.

Schools also create practice quality indicators themselves, while trying to create self-evaluation criteria that represent an effective means of ensuring the quality of vocational practice. When creating quality indicators, schools rely on the EQAVET system (European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education), the sequence of which can be presented in the sequence of planning, implementation, evaluation and creation of procedures for incorporating feedback and creating a structure of new goals. According to the respondents, the strongest element in practice is the practice mentor, who oversees the fulfilment of goals and deadlines.

In the context of improving practice, according to respondents, it is the most important to provide those professional qualifications that are able to meet the requirements of the labour market, another no less important indicator of quality is to promote educational success. The weakest practical tool from the students' point of view is individualization. The management of individual schools perceive lack of direction as the weakest point of practice, in which there is a lack of clear definition of who is responsible for certain activities.

In the paper we analyze students not only in the perspective of the meaningfulness of vocational practice, but also in the perspective of their own vision of themselves in the context of the meaningfulness of life. In agreement with Damasio, we examine students' attitudes towards themselves through projection into the future, into the values of life or motivational aspects. To determine the level of students' meaningfulness in life, we chose the so-called life meaningfulness scale intended as a valid tool for investigating especially the meaningfulness of life of young people.

This scale is composed of 18 questions. The respondent expresses on a five-point scale, the options for choosing an answer from 1 – I do not agree at all; 2 – I do not agree; 3 – I can't decide; 4 – I agree to 5 – I completely agree. The meaning of life scale has three dimensions (cognitive, motivational and affective), each of which contains 6 items (Halama & Semancová, 2014), while the individual items in the questionnaire were not arranged sequentially, but randomly alternating statements from the three areas.

The cognitive dimension is understood as the overall orientation in life, life mission or understanding of life. The cognitive component of the meaning of life represents a kind of cognitive image that includes not only a person's ideas about the world, but also about himself and his place in broader or narrower contexts. On the basis of an internal cognitive image or an internalized cognitive scheme, a person attributes a certain sense, meaning and adequate values to activities, phenomena, deeds in various life situations. A meaningfully added cognitive component indicates that the individual is aware that his life is organized, that he has a good philosophy of life, which is the basis of a full and balanced life. Such a person is aware of his life goals, his life mission. According to Halama (2002), on the contrary, with an underdeveloped cognitive component, a person has a feeling of emptiness, chaos not only in the world, but also in the closest sphere of his influence, he cannot find meaning in his activities, in various life situations, he feels existential anxiety, he has a fear of death, fear of responsibility. An individual with such an internal cognitive schema does not see the world as meaningful and coherent.

Motivational dimension refers to goals, plans, as well as the strength and persistence of commitment to them. The motivational component reflects ideas about the future world and one's own functioning, which a person transforms into goals and tasks that he tries to fulfill. Thus, he tries to invest energy in work and efforts so that the tasks he has set are fulfilled. He also decides what needs to be accomplished and what not, what is worth fighting for, what goal to strive for. These also include opposite tendencies: what should be avoided, what should be prevented. According to Halama (2002), the absence of goals to which a person devotes himself is accompanied by boredom, apathy, a person feels hopeless, that he cannot find goals, that he cannot persevere in them and that he is unable to resist obstacles in life (Verešová & Pohánka, 2008).

The affective dimension represents life satisfaction, fulfillment, optimism coming from experiencing the meaning of life or, on a negative level, disgust, feelings of monotony, etc. The affective component is related to the emotional component of the meaning of life. When a person has a positive idea about life, about the world, about himself, has set goals that he tries to fulfill despite obstacles and succeeds, he feels happy, cheerful and satisfied. He feels that his life is meaningful, fulfilled. If he fails to fulfill his life tasks, he feels sadness, unhappiness, anxiety, dissatisfaction, he may experience depression. He then evaluates his life as meaningless, mundane, longs for a new, different life (Halama, 2002; Halama & Semancová, 2014).

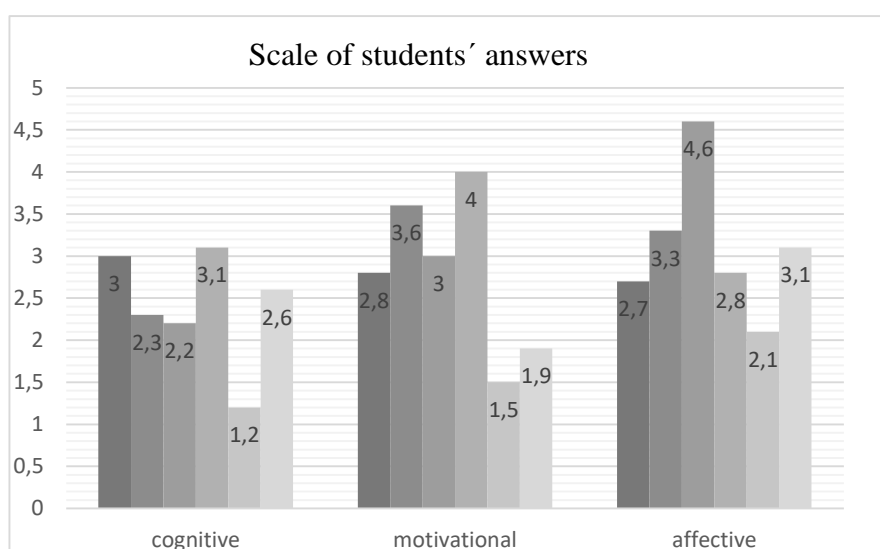


Figure 2. Scale of students' answers

#### Cognitive component

1. I consider my life valuable and useful;
2. I managed to find a certain mission or role in life;
3. I feel that my life has a clear direction;
4. I do not understand at all why I am in the world and what I am actually living for;
5. I know what the ultimate goal of my life is;
6. I have a life philosophy or belief that helps me see meaning in life;

#### Motivational component

1. I do not really know what I want to do in life;
2. There are things in my life in which I am fully involved;
3. I do not have enough strength to do what I consider important;
4. I have several plans and goals in my life;
5. Obstacles and problems awaken new powers and abilities in me;
6. I have certain goals in life that I would like to fulfil;

#### Affective component

1. Life seems empty and worthless to me;
2. Disgust and apathy are a normal part of my life;
3. Life seems monotonous to me and I am mostly bored;

4. I am looking forward to what my life will bring in the future;
5. My life is full of interesting things;
6. I am satisfied with my life, even if it is sometimes difficult;

At the cognitive level, the maximum is represented by the statement *I don't understand at all why I'm in the world and what I'm actually living for*. Although respondents of controlled interviews were students in the age group of 16-18 years, this scepticism resonates negative and surprising. Similarly, other statements in the cognitive field concerning the directions of young people's lives reflect uncertainty and a kind of fear or disinterest in finding the courage to grasp the future clearly and meaningfully through one's own effort.

The motivational component achieves maximum in the sentence *I have many plans and goals in my life*, but obstacles and problems are not seen by young people as something that can be a driving force and a determinant of future success. Rather, they discourage them, make them uncertain, as if young people are not used to losing and do not know whether they want to fight for their success.

In the affective area, the statement *"Life seems monotonous to me and mostly bores me"* reached the maximum, and the minimum reached the statement *„My life is full of interesting things“*. This situation is a very urgent challenge for us teachers and, last but not least, for parents. Young people seem to live a very comfortable and good life, while lacking a degree of awareness of this condition. Young people have "lost themselves" in the context of consumerism and adult care. They have acquired everything in life easily, and the moment of their own effort remains blurred, without clear contours of their own activity and effort. Probably, the attitude of not only parents, but also us teachers is underpinned by this state. We forget that endlessly making everything easier for young people, helping them, trying to solve problems for them, emphasizing only the pleasant side of life for them, is ultimately counterproductive and harmful for the young generation. Knowing how to say "no", knowing how to be appropriately strict, requiring adequate activity and expenditure of energy for qualitative growth in theoretical and especially practical training in vocational education is an urgent challenge for the present and the future.

## Conclusion

Active and meaningful life, professionalism or a full-fledged orientation towards the future - that is the self-reflection of students. If the students' motivation for the future is in many ways unconvincing, it is desirable to analyze the conditions in the school. Are we teachers doing enough to gradually reveal to young people the path of their direction?

The quality of the future can only be built by teachers who create in their students not only the required system of knowledge and abilities, but who create and patiently build respect for wisdom as a strenuous intellectual activity in students. By respecting the wisdom of the students, the teacher shows them authentic human freedom, understanding that freedom is above all a huge force of responsibility. And responsibility towards the students is transparently manifested in respect and understanding of the never-ending interconnectedness.

## Scientific Ethics Declaration

The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

## Acknowledgements or Notes

\*This article was presented as an oral presentation at the International Conference on Science and Education ([www.iconse.net](http://www.iconse.net)) held in Antalya/Turkey on November 16-19, 2023

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#### To cite this article:

Ruskova, D., & Vaskova, L. (2023). Self-reflection on the meaningfulness of vocational students' lives and their expectations from the future in the context of demanded quality. *The Eurasia Proceedings of Educational & Social Sciences (EPESS)*, 33, 40-46.