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The Development of Capabilities of Young People with Low Skills. The Case Study of a Vocational Education Programme in Poland.

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1 Introduction

This case study of an educational initiative for young people gives an insight into the structural problems faced by employers and education providers in Poland resulting from a decreasing popularity of vocational education and legal regulations at the intersection of educational, economic and political fields. The programme "We empower you to learn" was created in response to these constraints by a big foreign international power industry company in cooperation with upper secondary vocational schools. It addressed young people in vocational education and aimed at improving their educational and professional prospects. Compared to other training and educational initiatives in Poland, it might be considered innovative, because of its preventive and long-term character as well as a broad range of good quality services.

By applying Amartya's Sen capability approach (CA) (1992), we analyse what are the decisive factors that facilitate or impede development of freedom of young people in vulnerable situations. This theoretical framework takes into account the individuals' perspective on what "doings" and "beings" (Sen calls it functionings) they treat as valuable. Adopting this normative standpoint, public action is evaluated in terms of supporting or hindering the development of individuals' "capabilities" i.e. their effective freedom to achieve these valuable functionings. The CA gives us the analytical instruments to distinguish factors, which make the educational process relatively successful and contribute to the opening of real opportunities for its participants. In order to grasp negative factors crucial for limiting freedom to choose life one has reason to value, our analysis of empirical data was also inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's general remarks on mechanisms of social reproduction operating through education system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970).

2 Origins of the programme for youth in vocational education

The origins of the programme "We empower you to learn" are closely connected – on the one hand – to structural problems faced by companies and vocational schools resulting from the recent history of the educational system in Poland; and – on the other – to the specific situations of organisations implementing the programme: the ENERGET company and the secondary vocational school, subsequently called TECHNIQUE.

Restructuring of centrally planned economy and dismantling of communist regime had important consequences for the educational system (Mertaugh and Hanushek 2005). In result of new financial and governance rules introduced in the 1990s, the central government transfers to local territorial units an amount of money that they might spent on education. Local governments were appointed the role of managers responsible for balancing costs and benefits of primary and secondary education. The main criterion – on which the granted amount depends – is the number of pupils in primary and secondary education in a territorial

unit. It triggered the process of shutting down educational facilities, which generated high expenses. Schools found themselves in a position requiring strategic thinking in marketing categories in order to attract the maximum number of students and avoid being closed. They started to organise meetings with candidates, advertise their educational offer and change their specialisations according to trends of popularity (and not necessarily labour market demand).

These changes of financial and governance rules together with increasing popularity of general education hit particularly hard vocational schools, since their infrastructure generates more costs and – for many years – the number of candidates has been decreasing. In order to avoid closing schools, headmasters tended to introduce rapid "re-skilling": e.g. teachers of vocations – which were not popular enough and too expensive – were asked to change their specialisation into cheaper and more attractive. They were forced to learn sometimes a completely new speciality in a matter of days. This has resulted in the declining quality of vocational schooling, since teachers who freshly "re-skilled" had no practical knowledge of the new subjects.

Moreover, vocational education has been separated from employers when companies gave up the educational functions typical for the communist system and closed their vocational schools. As a result, enterprises lack influence on the list of vocations taught in schools, the content of minimum curricula and external technical exams, which are defined by central government institutions and remain resistant to modifications (Sztanderska *et al.* 2007, 31).

All above-mentioned structural changes have had far-reaching consequences, among others, the coexistence of high youth unemployment rate with persistent shortages of workers in some sectors of economy. They also hit particularly hard ENERGET and TECHNIQUE due to their specific situations. In the middle of 2000s, ENERGET found itself in disadvantageous position: the moment of retirement of important part of its power engineering technicians was approaching, meanwhile this specialisation was eliminated from the list of vocations taught in schools years ago and there was no educational facility providing training in this domain. Shortages concerned in particular lower and middle rank technicians, since higher rank employees were easier to recruit among graduates of technological universities or by promoting current ENERGET employees.

ENERGET mobilised different circles – academics, teachers, local authorities, employers organisations – to lobby for restoring this specialisation and to work on updating its curriculum. In 2010 the Minister of National Education finally amended the directive regulating this issue (MEN 2010). ENERGET also initiated the programme "We empower you to learn", that preceded the re-introduction of the "power-engineering technician" specialty. The programme aimed at pupils in vocational schools eager to learn elements of power engineering as an extracurricular activity.

TECHNIQUE was one of the two schools that entered into cooperation with the company. It was chosen for in-depth research, because of low skills of its pupils, which is the effect of low popularity of vocational education in general together with TECHNIQUE's weak position in a highly competitive Warsaw educational market[1]. On the wave of mass interest in general

[1] The selection to upper secondary schools is based on results of external exams. Best performers are given priority to choose schools, others go to schools with remaining places. As TECHNIQUE is not renown there is no competition to get there – it accepts all candidates regardless of their results.

education after 1989 and the introduction of the new rules of financing, it was forced to open general upper secondary school and retrench vocational education. In 2008, the general high school was closed, when it lost in a competition for new candidates and since then all the efforts have been invested in vocational school. Therefore, cooperation with a big international company seemed to be a good opportunity to get financial and educational support as well as an effective way to promote school and attract candidates. From the very beginning, the programme was meant to evolve into the opening of classes with the specialisation of "power engineering technician", which took place in 2011/2012 after the end of research.

3 Methodological issues

The study was based on documentary and statistical data analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs). The first methods were used for obtaining background knowledge and select relevant case: we analysed the influence of recent changes in the educational system on the challenges encountered by vocational schools and employers seeking for workers with specific skills (Sztandar-Sztanderska and Zieleńska 2012).

The idea was to choose a programme for youth that was innovative in a sense that it attempted to deal with the identified structural problems instead of providing short-term training or internship for young unemployed after the end of their regular education. The case study includes curricular lessons provided by the TECHNIQUE as well as the extracurricular courses offered by ENERGET. It was impossible to separate them, because there were strongly interdependent: what students learnt at school could influence their performance during TECHNIQUE's workshops or apprenticeships and vice versa; grades which students received from mandatory classes determined whether they qualified for ENERGET scholarships.

Qualitative methods were required to analyse education as an interactive process that takes place in a concrete setting between concrete individuals and which is mediated through their interpretations instead of being a de-contextualised transfer of knowledge with standardised effects. IDIs were at the core of the case study methodology. We interviewed 20 people. Their selection reflects the effort to meet requirements of data triangulation (Denzin 1970). We included individuals from various organisations (school, company, local authorities and administration, association cooperating with ENERGET, university) and representing different interests and perspectives on the programme. Among students, we decided to conduct interviews only with those from second and third grade, who had at least one year experience of being in the programme to form their opinions. A diverse group has been chosen for the study, consisting of students with the best, average and weak school results, involved and not involved in closer cooperation with ENERGET, male and female (one of the only two female students from those classes was interviewed).

Finally, two stipulations have to be made. Firstly, we were denied the access to information on social and material situation of students (e. g. which students get support from social services) and details on their school performance. The school authorities were worried of contravening students' right to privacy. Second of all, the study had finished before any of the students took general and vocational exams . Therefore, we do not know if the skills and knowledge they gained in the programme will be sufficient for them to get official diplomas. However, it is clear that a lack of diploma if they fail is an important obstacle for later educational and professional choices.

4 Theoretical background and research questions

All forms of support for young people provided together by ENERGET and TECHNIQUE will be regarded as what Sen calls "commodities". This term refers to different goods and services, in this particular case – curricular and extracurricular activities, school equipment and scholarships. As Sen emphasises, how they will be used depends on individual and non-individual features, called "conversion factors" – someone's skills and knowledge, traits of character, social norms and legal framework of the society, but also financial situation and other resources one has access to. He often explains it by referring to simple examples, like the one of a bike: the meaning a bike will have for individuals and their freedom to use it will be different in case of someone, who has the ability to ride it than for someone who does not, in the city where there are bicycle lanes and where there are not, etc.

This relation between commodities and conversion factors has great relevance for the analysis of the programme: although all the participants are presented with theoretically the same access to goods and services in its framework, their ability to use it depends on the interaction between various individual and non-individual conversion factors. Taking a CA normative standpoint, our focus is therefore on empirically distinguishing what makes it easier or more difficult (or even impossible) to use these commodities to realise goals these particular young people treat as valuable.

As long as we want to apply this approach to simple phenomena like riding a bike, it will suffice. However, it was difficult to adopt Sen's general economic model for the purpose of empirical analysis of dynamics between different capacitating and constraining factors. In order to name some of the observed mechanisms that indicated that the programme also contributed to the reinforcement of inequalities between students, we decided to refer to some observations of Bourdieu and his collaborators on education system and development of dispositions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Bourdieu 1979; 1998). During the analysis of empirical material we realised that their concluding remarks on social reproduction based on the macro analysis of French society conducted a few decades ago are useful in the analysis of processes taking place on this micro scale in different social and historical context.

For the purpose of empirical analysis, our general research question on capacitating and constraining factors was divided into three more detailed problems. Their formulation was simultaneously inspired by mechanisms described by Sen and Bourdieu as well as preliminary research findings.

Firstly, individuals' freedom to act may be restricted even if their access to commodities seems fairly open. Our assumption based on quantitative data on education system (Sztandar-Sztanderska and Zieleńska 2012), later confirmed by statements of teachers, ENERGET employees and students themselves, was that pupils entering the school had generally low level of skills and knowledge and that there were significant inequalities between them. Therefore, we decided to explore this issue by verifying whether their previous (formal and informal) education equipped them with skills that enable them to use commodities provided in the programme or if not, whether the programme itself develops these skills and equalises chances between individuals, by, for example, making them able to understand the lectures and exercises; set their own goals and find the way to achieve them; discern rules of the game and play along with them (e.g. understand actual criteria for recruitment to ENERGET or criteria they have to fulfil to pass final exams). Our inspiration here was Bourdieu's classical study on reproduction in which he observes that school often demands from pupils abilities it

does not teach and it symbolically distinguishes and rewards pupils that acquired them through socialisation in families with higher cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970). We decided to investigate further if similar processes take place in the programme.

Secondly, both Sen and Bourdieu pay attention to the process of adaptation of preferences and show that people rarely aspire for something that is improbable to achieve, because of constraints, such as for example norms concerning male- and female-types of education and occupation. This mechanism of self-limitation – according to Bourdieu – is usually not a matter of informed choices of individuals as suggested by rational actor model. It is based on previous experiences and involves excluding options that – as he calls it – are often "unthinkable" (Bourdieu 1980). It means that we might exclude something as "not for us" not because we do not want or value it, but because it did not cross our mind that it is a possibility. By a Latin expression "*amor fati*" Bourdieu emphasises that taste is formed by the experience of constraints and people in disadvantaged situations learn to like and choose what is more probable to achieve (Bourdieu 1979; Sztandar-Sztanderska 2010, 43-45). In the case study, we will pay attention to dynamics of constraining norms used by teachers and "mentors" and adaptive preferences of students. Bourdieu is useful in providing us with tools to analyse reproduction (what we call in this text constraining factors), whereas Sen's theory is better suited for analytically enumerating conditions that have to be fulfilled in order to create freedom to achieve valuable functionings. This question is developed in, among others, in the article by Bonvin and Farvaque, in which they insist on importance of institutions that create space for the beneficiaries' normative judgments on the life they have reason to value, which is called "capability for voice" (Bonvin and Farvaque 2005). They argue, along with Sen (1990), that the development of freedom demands the effective possibility to co-define criteria of assessment used during implementation of public policy (so called "informational basis of judgment") in order to voice without restraint individual preferences about one's life, to reject unfair judgement and to participate as equal member of public process. In line with these authors, we focus on the way the voice of young people is framed in the programme and on factors that expand or limit it.

Finally, we found it important to analyse whether the educational path outlined by the programme does not limit students' future freedom by being too specific and making changes of education and professional career difficult. This concern becomes even more significant due to the fact that ENERGET has clear interest in preparing pupils for work in the company. For this reason, we decided to analyse to what extent the programme focused on creation of skills specific for this industry, company, particular power plant or skills that might be useful in other educational and work paths. We can paraphrase it in Bourdieu's terms (1986): whether cultural capital they acquire in embodied (skills, dispositions) or institutionalised form (diplomas) would be useful in other fields than this school and this company or economy sector.

5 Forms of support in the programme "We empower you to learn"

In 2009 ENERGET assumed patronage of the school. Every school year TECHNIQUE opened one class under auspices of ENERGET. During the study there were already three classes in this school: with first-, second- and third-year students (aged 16-19). They were taught in the vocation called "technician-mechanic with the specialisation in construction of power machines", which at that time was closest to the demands of ENERGET among vocations enlisted centrally. ENERGET provided the vocational school with financial, material and educational support, quite unusual for companies in Poland in terms of range,

duration and comprehensiveness of action. The company supplemented a standard curriculum with non-mandatory and mandatory activities: vocational and soft-skill workshops, excursions to power plants and apprenticeships. It also granted scholarships for the best students in every class. Apart from that, selected pupils were invited to participate in so-called "ambassador programme" and play a role of representatives of the company at school by transferring information, organising meetings, etc.

ENERGET employees (called "mentors") responsible for the programme implemented it without extra-remuneration. In the school year 2010/2011 alone, 21 employees volunteered to teach students beyond their regular job. Their personal commitment seems to exceed the narrow interest of organisation to prepare and pre-select students to work there and to promote the company. According to interviewees, they were dedicated to their tasks, eager to modify their teaching methods to attract attention and adapt to level of skills and experience of young people. Also the school went beyond typical educational activities: a psychologist was hired to support students; some of the teachers provided "catch-up" after lessons and fixed their permanence hours for individual consultation.

Moreover, the school benefited from the material and symbolic support of the company that was used to construct a new image. Marketing became a new domain of school activity and ENERGET's brand and promotional materials provided by the company were used to win over candidates. As one of our interviewees stated: *we learn marketing because now the school... It is not anymore a student who asks to come to school, but the school asks him to come. The cooperation with* [ENERGET] *is used in this recruitment action* <teacher 1>. Many teachers thought about the cooperation not only as an opportunity to change the school image and to improve employment prospects of school graduates, but also to secure school's position and attract better candidates.

Clear organisation goals, both of TECHNIQUE and ENERGET, and personal involvement of their employees were the key to the relative success of the programme. Teachers from the upper secondary vocational school as well as ENERGET employees shared a common interest to develop it with particular care for quality, which differentiates it from many ad-hoc short-term training programmes designed for vulnerable groups in Poland[2]. The programme gave students opportunities to learn and to experience themselves in various situations which could not have been provided by the school alone. However, there are also more detailed aspects of its implementation that require discussion. We analyse them in the next section.

6 Conversion factors versus constraining factors

The programme comprised of various capacitating and incapacitating elements. We will describe them by referring to the three particular problems described in the theoretical part: 1) generality *versus* specificity of skills and knowledge taught during the courses; 2) ability to use provided commodities; 3) adaptation of preferences *versus* capability for voice.

7 Producing good ENERGET employees or increasing capabilities

The analysis of the empirical data has shown that although the programme is designed to answer a very specific problem of ENERGET, many elements seem to work in favour of

[2] Public Employment Services responsible for training the unemployed focus on low prices and high number of participants, which results in short-term courses of mediocre quality (Liwiński and Sztanderska 2006; Sztandar-Sztanderska 2009).

creating more general capabilities for work and education instead of "formatting" people to become its employees. By referring to Bourdieu's terminology, we could say the programme gives the participants opportunities to acquire dispositions that may become embodied capitals in other vocational and educational domains.

All the interviewed students – regardless of their grades and plans for the future – positively evaluated the extracurricular activities provided by the company. The apprenticeships were assessed the highest, but also workshops and lectures were considered more interesting than regular classes. They emphasised mentors' ability to present theory by using examples from everyday life – what contrasted with their school experiences. As one of the students puts it:

"We have a lot of theory dictated from books in vocational subjects. Whereas here (...) [in ENERGET's workshops], we had slides and they gave us materials to those presentations. They described step by step the construction and functioning of boiler (...). There was no pure theory, they brought some stuff, did experiments – generally it was more interesting than lessons" <student 1>.

Courses conducted by ENERGET employees were also helpful in understanding subjects discussed during compulsory lessons. One of the mentors recalls a student coming to him and saying that he has learnt more during the lecture than at school:

"There was this Kuba, he came after one of the lectures (...) – very basic one, only fundamentals. And he said: 'You know what? I learnt more during those two hours, than for the past six months at school'. We were speechless, really" <employee 2>.

Mentors emphasised that their aim was to show students various ways of applying theory to practice, not to prepare them to work at the company. The latter would be impossible, because two week apprenticeship is too short for this purpose.

Although the programme focused on providing participants with knowledge from specific areas, it also included workshops aiming at development of so-called "soft skills". They were twofold: organised by school psychologist directed at increasing the integration of classes; and provided by ENERGET where students had the opportunity to learn how to present themselves, communicate effectively, write CVs and prepare to job interviews. The school authorities seemed to value the most the former aspect, which was considered essential in the contemporary labour market. Also students perceived training in public speeches useful, not only for seeking employment, but also for passing the final oral exams.

Another aspect of the programme, which worked in favour of building more general skills were the "catch-up" classes. School employees organised tutoring from science after compulsory lessons to give students with learning difficulties the chance to improve. This seems the more important provided that in Poland the most common way to deal with such differences is to shift the responsibility on parents expecting them to pay for private tutoring, regardless of their financial situation.

Although the programme provides additional courses, which work in favour of creating capabilities, students' future depends to a large extent on fulfilling the requirements of obligatory education (acquiring institutionalised cultural capital in Bourdieu's terms). They are obliged to pass a general final exam to continue education at tertiary level. They also have

to pass the vocational exam if they want to work in their vocation (e.g. no matter how well evaluated by ENERGET employees they are, they will not get the job in the company without both of them). No one has taken them so far, because the exams will be held after fourth grade. However, the fact that great many of them complain about the level of obligatory vocational courses and have very poor results, suggests a constraining factor. They explain it by the fact that their vocational teacher has problems with transferring knowledge and instead of improving teaching methods threatens to fail them.

8 Ability to use commodities

Students came to school with different knowledge, skills, expectations and plans, their life situations varied, i.e. they entered the programme having diverse conversion factors and what comes with it unequal ability to use commodities provided to them. Classes under auspices of ENERGET soon divided into small "elite" of best performers – to use teachers' wording – and "the rest". Best performers tend to combine various roles, positively evaluated by adults: a scholarship holder and an ambassador of the programme, sometimes together with other official functions (e.g. participant of students' government).

They seem more eager to set goals and more aware of the means needed to achieve them. Even though some of them not necessarily wish to become company's employees or even work in the area of power engineering, they discern that engagement in the programme may help them gain additional experience and qualities needed to realise their future plans. They are able to use the programme to realise the aims they consciously set for themselves. Many other students lack these skills and, thus, have difficulties to critically interpret the marketing message used to promote the school, saying that well-paid employment in ENERGET is guaranteed after graduation[3]. They seem not to be aware of other factors that play a role here: their school results, economic situation and changes of ownership of the company that are currently taking place. Moreover, many of them do not see any link between their future and current actions (e.g. consequences of choice of subjects for their final general exam).

This division into "the elite" and "the rest" tends to be permanent – the cases of people improving their position are rare. As one of the scholarship holders puts it: "*It's more that those who received the scholarships in the past years [get it]. They have a knack for it and they just learn, they are more diligent"* <student 2>.

The programme itself had influence on the fact that there was nearly no flow of people between the two mentioned groups. One of the reasons was the timing of extra-curricular courses which limited the chances of some students to take advantage from them. Firstly, the catch-up classes were organised after the lessons in the afternoon – and it was difficult for many of the students who lived in a considerable distance from school (mostly outside of the city) to attend them, because of the long journey home. Secondly, the lectures in the framework of vocational workshops took place during obligatory classes. It caused a twofold effect: On the one hand, some of pupils who had problems with various subjects were excluded from it, because absence on those lessons could worsen their performance:

[3] All interviewed ENERGET employees were displeased with this message used during school promotional campaigns. They repeated continuously during interviews that: employment is by no means guaranteed; if there is a vacancy, a formal requirement is to get positive grades in both general and vocational final exams and to win an official recruitment procedure; whereas salaries depend on a position and a job tenure, therefore students are mistaken to judge upon high salaries of upper rank workers.

"Interviewer*: Tell me, are you attending to* [the vocational workshops] *?*

Student*: No I don't.*

Interviewer*: You don't have time or you're not interested in it?*

Student*: It's that I had to learn more… and there was a time when it was during the lessons* (...) *they organised it during math – and I'm weak at math, I didn't want to skip it, get into bad books"* <student 3>.

On the other hand, some of the students with learning difficulties were eager to come to the workshops and skip obligatory classes regardless of potential negative consequences, such as worsening of their grades.

Finally, there are some inequalities between students in terms of family support. Some of them have parents working in ENERGET, who can provide them with better understanding of the specificities of the vocation or issues taught in the programme. One of the mentors confirms it:

"This is an inter-generational company. There was a time – not so often these days – that a father, two sons, and sons' wives worked here. (...) And there is this Marek in my group and his father works in the other power plant – he has it easier. Despite the fact that Marek is a very good and polite student… it's that his father helps him. The language of power engineering is specific – similarly to the language of the railway men or miners – you can say a word and another person immediately knows what this is about. Those students [whose parents work in ENERGET] *have it easier. They are more motivated."* <employee 2>.

In other words, they know more about the specificity of the job, understand better the professional language. Moreover, they can expect a warm welcome from co-workers as children of the employees, since there is still some attachment to the idea of the inter-generational company.

The abovementioned examples may be treated as the symptoms of reproduction of inequalities. School sets rules which make it more difficult for people in worse situation (in terms of school grades or distance to school from the place of living) to benefit from commodities provided in the programme. It requires from them exceptional effort and only few are able to do that. Moreover, some skills and knowledge that help people to be good performers are a part of the cultural capital they come to school with – often acquired in the family. It is more difficult for those who do not already have it, to develop it in the educational process. This seems a classic example of the phenomenon that school does not teach what it requires and rewards, described by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970).

9 Adaptation of preferences *versus* capability for voice

For most of the young people participating in the programme, failure is a foregone conclusion, therefore they do not even make attempts to learn more or engage in extracurricular activities. Instead, they present themselves as "not capable", "not interested", "not suited for".

Even though some of the participants have quickly realised that they are better prepared to face up to school's requirements than others it not necessarily worked in favour of their self-

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esteem. As one of the programme's participants acknowledges, he has never been a good performer in general lower secondary school, but here – in the upper secondary vocational school – he quickly became one of the best. Despite acquiring scholarship almost immediately after joining the school, he still thinks low of himself and his abilities:

"I picked this school as my first choice because I knew that I have no chance to get to better schools, which require higher scores from the external exams – I'm not the best student. And I liked the idea that I wouldn't have to stress out here (...). Majority of [friends form lower secondary] *went to general upper secondary schools. They could afford that, I couldn't. I'm not eager to learn, I'm lazy and stuff... so I decided on vocational school"* <student 5>.

It is striking, that even one of the best performers tends to picture himself as worse than others. The majority of students react to challenges with self-exclusion – they do not even try to improve their positions, i.e. they adapt preferences to their own definition of situation in which they are not capable of reaching some goals and fear to fail. This mechanism is reinforced in the programme. On the one hand, the best results are rewarded with the scholarship, while there are no rewards for improvement of results. On the other hand, best performers are symbolically distinguished from the rest by school authorities – they are the ones asked to represent school during official events and presentations. This way the division is reproduced. One of the teachers sums it up:

"It is now so, that we have those [ambassadors]*, people who are the most responsible of what is happening between the school and the company, and of course the scholarship holders – practically the same people from the first grade, a group of leaders. Those* [ambassadors] *and scholarship holders – they are on open days, school and company events, additional meetings"* <teacher 1>.

An extreme case of reproduction concerns female students in the programme, who are regarded by teachers and mentors as not suited for this specialisation because of their gender. It leads to their adaptation of preferences and stereotypical behaviours. Power engineering technician is represented as masculine vocation demanding physical strength. Two girls in the classes under auspices of ENERGET are not treated seriously and expectations towards them are lower:

"Interviewer: *The girls will not come* [to the company] *because… they don't want to?*

Mentor: *No, we have such work specific. We have just 6 women in production. And those are chemists, lab technicians. They work here but those are specific types of jobs: most of the times with university degree, environmental protection… we have two, one in accounting and in controlling."* <employee 2>.

The girls find themselves in a difficult position. They are not good performers and no one expects much from them. Their reaction is self-exclusion – they present themselves as not interested and indifferent to what is happening at school. This is a derivative of the mechanism of male domination described, among others, by Bourdieu: the fact that some vocations are perceived as male as a matter of "nature" leads to the conclusion that women – who are physically weaker than men – should not perform it (Bourdieu 1998). Argument of "nature" makes it very difficult to deny. The females at school react by conforming to these expectations without regarding them as unjust or wrong.

However, there was one factor that in case of some students lessened the adaptation of preferences. It might be considered a result of the increased plurality of the informational basis of judgment. ENERGET employees represented professional milieu and – unlike the teachers – were not part of "the school game". Students were impressed by their knowledge, expertise, stable professional careers and relatively high earnings. Interactions with them influenced their thinking about the future and contributed to expanding the set of choices considered possible.

Mentors apply different criteria to the assessment of students than teachers. They emphasise that they are looking for reliable and diligent people and not necessarily the best achievers ("*ants*" not "*eagles*"). One of them gave an example of a student who had to provide for his family and therefore resigned from the function of programme ambassador. He was never reproved or reprimanded during apprenticeship for being tired because of the night work. On the contrary he could count on some kind of conciliation and encouragement:

"Dawid, he supports a sister, a brother and a disabled father. And he often used to (...) *say: 'I'm so tired, I worked all night'. He has to earn the living. And you can see that he is honest– he is not a skiver, he just can't make it physically. He kept saying: 'I would like to come to work here'. He has been working somewhere for three month already and he received payment only for one month. And I said: 'I have been working here for 30 years and my salary was never late. This is a certain source of income. (...) Listen, if I am here next year – and I know I'll be here in a year – I'll be recruiting (…). I guarantee you will have huge, huge chances"* <employee 2>.

What mattered for the mentor was not his performance during apprenticeship, but his honesty, which made him trustworthy. Mentor also appreciated the fact that he was determined and ready to work hard. In other words, he fitted the profile of the company perfectly, even though he was not what school teachers would call an exemplary student.

Mentors have also different attitudes towards students than teachers – they treat them more as adults than children. In some cases it results in creating bonds and pushing young people to perform better than usual. There is an example of a student who was known for disturbing others during apprenticeship. One of the employees decided to talk to him and ask him for a gentlemen's agreement that they will treat each other as grown-ups and he will stop disturbing:

"Adam, Adam must have ADHD. (...) *And he has some kind of troubles – he works in some removals, he is tired all the time. He can sit for an hour, but then he starts fidgeting, he is up to something, he starts playing with his phone, pinching, pushing others.(...) And Jan* [one of the mentors] *says that he had to have a conversation with him. And at the end he told me that Adam kept his word and he was acting normally"* <employee 2>.

The mentor decided to thank him for that officially in front of the whole group. Because he could not come for the last day of apprenticeships, he wrote a letter which was read aloud. This story illustrates a situation in which someone has been motivated to go beyond the role performed in the group (school form). He was pushed by the mentor to try to step up to the expectation and he managed to do this.

Adaptation of preferences is to a certain extent a result of limited space to voice one's opinions, make them count in school. The programme is implemented in the traditional school

context where the rules and the roles are fairly fixed: it has a very clear hierarchy, manifesting itself in spatial organisation (benches set in rows with a teacher's podium in front) and rules of conduct in class (e.g. raising hands before asking question). There is little space for students to step beyond those hierarchical relations: they are expected to be active in these frames, show their competence and are evaluated according to these criteria. When asked about scope of participation of students in the programme, teachers and mentors respond that they are invited to propose topics for discussion or to ask questions if they do not understand something or want to get additional information. Neither students nor parents are invited to discuss criteria of assessment according to which young people are evaluated, even if there are conflictual situations. These limitations are not problematised by any of the sides, they remain – what sociologists call – "unthinkable", "self-evident", "taken for granted".

Finally, the adaptation of preferences especially in terms of future employment might be reinforced by the focus of soft-skills workshops. They concentrate on how to sell oneself to potential employers by effective presentation techniques, without teaching students about their rights defined by labour law. Student's transformation during school cycle is described as "growing up", "maturing", "learning how the real word functions" and adapting to these external rules of the game. The ideological conception behind is similar to what Gazier calls ''initiative employability" (1999). They have to be active, motivated and self-reliant. In contrast with, ''interactive" or ''embedded employability" which assumes that adaptation is a two-way process: individuals have to adapt to the labour market by acquiring crucial skills, but labour market also have to adapt to individuals and their rights should be respected.

10 Conclusions

The programme "We empower you to learn" is implemented in the context of growing separation between private sector and vocational education and the crisis of vocational education. On the one hand, employers have limited influence on curricula and lists of taught specialisation, which are defined centrally and mechanisms of changing them are rigid. On the other hand, vocational schools are permanently underfunded, their equipment is often out-dated and level of teaching mediocre.

The fact that this programme responds to immediate and shared interest of the company ENERGET and the vocational school TECHNIQUE revealed to be a key to its relative success. Employees of ENERGET and teachers were more willing to pay attention to quality, invest their time and effort and reflexively adapt their actions to problems encountered during implementation. However, the selected programme stands out from other educational initiatives for two more reasons. Firstly, a strong position of ENERGET and many resources at company's disposal made such a long-term and multi-dimensional initiative possible. Secondly, cooperation with a school seems to be a better way to implement this kind of initiative than doing it in the frame of labour market policies. Mainly because it offers possibility to work repeatedly with young people over a period of their three- or four-year educational cycle instead of short-term training that is provided by Public Employment Services in Poland.

Despite our concerns that the power industry company would focus only on pre-selecting candidates for future employees and investing in the development of specific skills necessary for the job, the programme came out to be much more than just a vocational preparation. It offered students the opportunities to learn general skills and to experience themselves in various situations, which could not have been provided by school on its own. In other words,

it worked in favour of expanding their chances for choosing the life they have reason to value, and not only formatting them to be good ENERGET employees.

Nevertheless, as our article clearly shows this improvement in access to infrastructure and to well-prepared courses and workshops is only the first step. The problem of highly unequal initial skills was never fully overcome and many of the students remained ill-equipped to make use of what was offered. Following Sen, we could say that although the commodities provided in the programme were the same for everyone, the conversion factors remained highly differentiated. Generally speaking, the division between "good" and "bad" students was reproduced and symbolically reinforced by some of the school activities, among others, by rewarding the best students called "elite" instead of those that might be improving. The extreme case of this process of reproduction was gender discrimination.

We observed many symptoms of the process, which we called after Sen adaptation of preferences. Many of the students who were not in the group of the best performers tended to self-limit and self-exclude from trying to reach for something (become an ambassador of the programme, improve grades), because they envisage it as not for them. It was strongly connected to low self-esteem and negative definitions of what they are capable of, which generally have not changed during the programme. However, the possibility to interact with employees of ENERGET, who represented various professional and social backgrounds, increased the chance to find someone who would see their potential and help them overcome negative thinking.

The application of CA supplemented by selected theoretical concepts of Bourdieu accentuated several important aspects concerning the study of educational programmes and initiatives that might not have been noticed otherwise. First of all, the education process is not a simple transfer of knowledge – what counts immensely is the ability to establish personal relationships with students, based on trust and knowledge of their life situation and individual approach to their needs and skills. It is not enough to give people commodities such as lessons and expect them to make the best use of it, because their ability to do this varies for different reasons and not necessarily their talent, but also their cultural capital. This is an important conclusion as far as macro analyses and popular benchmarking of education are concerned – they concentrate on measuring selected effects: for example how many people pass upper secondary general and vocational exams or how many people attain higher education or find employment. What disappears here are the reasons for which people fail according to those measures of effects. Yet, this can be understood when focusing on the process of building capabilities, i.e. widening or closing access to valuable functionings that takes places in the educational process.

Second of all, CA helped us to discover some limitations of school as an institution promoting capabilities. There is no place for negotiating criteria of assessment (or in other words "informational bases of judgment") – every action is subordinated to exams and preparation to it. A good student is, therefore, someone who follows this rule. As a result, school does not really encourage people to choose the life they have reason to value, but the life which is valued according to external norms on which they have no influence. In this sense, it is connected to Bourdieu's assessment that its role is to reproduce social order and legitimise this reproduction.

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