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**“GOOD EDUCATION”
AND ITS INSTRUMENTAL DESCRIPTION
IN THE NARRATIONS OF ADULTS WHO HAVE BECOME STUDENTS**
„DOBRA EDUKACJA” I JEJ INSTRUMENTALNY SPOSÓB OPISU
W WYPOWIEDZIACH DOROSŁYCH, KTÓRZY STALI SIĘ STUDENTAMI

ABSTRACT: The author of this article argues that the problem of good education is a public issue. Inspired by theorist G.J.J. Biesta who posed questions regarding the significance of good education, the author interviewed adult students about this phenomenon. The phenomenographic analyses of students’ statements unveiled three description categories of good education. These are: good education as a synonym of the school which fulfils standards of teaching, good education as an instrument of human success and good education as a tool of human enlightening. All the students’ descriptions led to the observation that the common horizon of the understanding of good education was the idea of education as a method which is goal oriented. This means that good education is described here through the prism of concrete aims and effective tools, but not by means of problematic ideas and values which serve these goals. This attitude may result in instrumental relations between people and the world, and the quality of the (worse) human condition.

KEYWORDS: good education, phenomenography, instrumentality.

ABSTRAKT: Autorka niniejszego tekstu podejmuje głos w sprawie dobrej edukacji jako ważnej kwestii publicznej. Inspirując się pytaniem współczesnego teoretyka G.J.J. Biesta, co to znaczy, że edukacja jest dobra, przeprowadza wywiady wśród dorosłych studentów, będących jednocześnie rodzicami, na ten właśnie temat. Ujawnione w wyniku fenomenograficznej analizy kategorie opisu tak zwanej „dobrej edukacji” rozumianej jako a) wywiązywanie się szkoły ze standardów nauczania, b) traktowanie edukacji jako środka do kariery, c) traktowanie szkolnej edukacji jako narzędzia „oświecania”, pokazują wyraźnie, że dominującym horyzontem jej rozumienia jest widzenie w edukacji głównie metody nauczycielskiego postępowania w celu osiągnięcia zamierzonego efektu kształcenia. Chodzi zatem o realizację celów już zdefiniowanych, a nie o wartość i znaczenie tego celu czy problematyzowanie idei, którym edukacja miałaby służyć. To, jak twierdzi autorka, może przenosić się na budowanie instrumentalnych relacji człowiek – świat i jakość naszej (gorszej) ludzkiej kondycji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: dobra edukacja, fenomenografia, instrumentalizm.

Introduction

This article is one of the effects of a study aimed at reconstructing the meaning of good education from the perspective of different groups of adults, whose diverse experiences of “being in education” and “thinking about it” may constitute a valuable source of

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knowledge in regards to our interest in this matter. What does it mean that education is good, and what would have to happen for it to be this way? This is the question that will be addressed in this article by referring to in-depth open statements of adults, who are living their adult life in relation to work and starting a family in the conditions of the free market; they are constructing their social roles in the context of having to learn a new institutionalism in Poland – one that is being shaped by the social, economic and legal order of standards typical of the Western world – and fulfilling their roles as citizens in a situation of creating democratic order. In terms of their generation, they are people born after 1981, currently between the ages of 38 and 48. They became students when they were already parents and workers, which proves that education is important to them for various reasons and this is why, after many years, they return to the education system in order to finally obtain a higher education. They pursue degrees related to the humanities as well as the social, engineering and natural sciences. They originate from large as well as small cities, and their biographies are formed in the late years of the Polish People's Republic, the beginning of the neoliberal economy and the cultural revolution that took place under the sign of postmodernity. Their educational careers, similarly, to those of their children, are formed in public schools, while their experience as students in higher education is gained by attending public and non-private universities¹.

The reason for looking into this matter was a question posed by Gert J.J. Biesta (2010) regarding what it meant by good education. As per the author, this notion represents a form of opposition to treating education in the modern world as a service aimed at achieving an immediate effect, meaning education, the essence of which is to provide a student with “conditions for learning”. Put simply, one can say that according to Biesta, education aimed at providing learning conditions instrumentalises people and the world in which we live and deprives us of concern for what is truly important. In this sense, it is worth questioning the point and meaning of education, as well as the ideas behind it, and why these and not others are considered important. Meanwhile, in the area of adult didactics, the creation of learning opportunities for adults is considered a positive action, it is an expression of the “humanisation” of the traditional forms of teaching and of giving the responsibility for learning to those who are interested. After

¹ The subject of the analyses in this article concerns 20 transcripts of interviews, conducted with 10 women and 10 men in 2019. All those who were chosen and agreed to answer and to have these answers recorded were student pursuing degrees unrelated to teaching and pedagogy. The statements of those with a specialisation in teaching will be covered by a separate analysis and are not considered in this article. The number of interviews comes from the practices of Swedish researchers, who claim that new descriptive categories do not emerge after the twentieth interview. It is important to note that phenomenography does not study narratives in terms of their semantic schemes or critical events in a biographical sense. If the term „narration” is used it is only meant as a synonym of an utterance or statement.

all, it is synonymous with focusing on the needs and interests of the learner and a signal of belief in his/her limitless possibilities for development. "The provision of conditions for learning" also means creating the possibility to manifest personal (specific) experience as a source of one's own learning (Usher et al. 1997, pp. 93-120).

The methodological approach was set in the perspective of phenomenography². The way of posing questions: "what according to you is good education?", technically provokes this approach, while in a cognitive sense it allows for the reconstruction of various ways of describing this phenomenon – in alignment with the aim of the project. The analysis of the results sought to derive descriptive categories³ that make up the concept of a good education.

It by no means aimed to show the state of awareness of this small and specifically selected group of people, but rather to see what issues are presented as important in the description of education and what they manifest.

As a result of the analysis of the statements made by adult participants, the results of which will be presented later, what emerged was that good education is schooling that in fact implements the curriculum and uses modern forms of teaching; a well selected specialisation that ensures a decent life; a form of enlightenment whose form prevents individual and universal catastrophe; as well as an instrument that shapes the belonging to a nation and an identification with tradition and culture.

From the description of the phenomenographic procedure, we know that the descriptive categories have both an individual and collective character, which means that they can be a derivative of one statement as well as of many, but in terms of importance they have the same cognitive status (Marton 1986, pp. 28-49). In this project, it became apparent that the common horizon for understanding what good education is in separate categories of its description was the identification of its importance with the

² In Poland, since the late 1990's, many publications appeared in which authors presented the results of their phenomenographic studies and the assumptions of this method. In the "Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów", several times, there appeared attempts at these types of studies and the clarification as to the procedure itself. It may be worth to mention a couple Polish authors involved in the practice of this approach: A. Jurgiel (2009), *O możliwościach poznawczych fenomenografii* "Pedagogika Kultury", Vol. 5, pp. 97-104; A. Jurgiel (2008), *Doświadczenie dorosłości w życiu studentem. Fragment badania fenomenograficznego*, "Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów", Vol. 9, pp. 61-68; A. Jurgiel (2018), *Praktyki bycia rodzicem w narracjach 30-latków o wychowaniu własnych dzieci. Implikacje andragogiczne*, "Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów", Vol. 18.

³ Arriving at the empirical descriptive categories was conducted according to the following procedure: from condensing the text of statements from different interviews, to comparing their contexts, seeking differences and similarities in their understanding, to selecting a criterium that constitutes a descriptive category and assigning it a name in the language of the researcher. It is important to note that when presenting the results, the descriptive language has a character that most accurately reconstructs the understanding of „someone else's reality". It is in the phase of seeking a theoretical perspective that could explain the understanding, experiencing and conceptualizing of phenomena of the surrounding world that we as researchers step out of this common understanding.

ways of existence of the school as a teaching institution in accordance with the tasks for which it was established, including with a strong focus on aligning its functioning to the individual interests of students, which are determined by the ability to establish “what the world needs”.

Thus, it seems that we are in a place in which, as Z. Kwiecinski (1991) described – “education is becoming a value which is still being recovered”. Except for the fact that the previously mentioned author, active in the 1990s was referring to socialist schools and their flexible functioning based on the subordination of the individual to the state – pointing to the need for them to become socialised while recognising that they are our common good and a space for new opportunities of development. It turns out that, we, who additionally have an awareness of the neoliberal implications of education⁴, are again asking the same questions, though for even different reasons (?).

Ways of understanding “good education” in the narratives of adults who have become students

Good education as a form of implementing the standards of modern teaching

The dominant way of describing what education is in the entirety of the material is done in relation to the criterion of identifying education with the formal education system, meaning, with different types of schools including universities. However, that which characterises a “good” school is, as referenced by the participants of the study, its ability to satisfy and implement standards of modernity. The standards being the school’s orientation towards creating learning conditions by organising for students the possibility to act and to activate their learning:

*All this cramming and memorising has been insane for years! **Good education means a creative school with experiments, laboratories and all those novelties, one can’t always practice at the blackboard with chalk, that’s not how it works in the rest of the world.** We just envy others in Europe, that they have it better, and yet we aren’t stupid ourselves. Once our parents studied less and were better at it, they didn’t sit from morning to evening at school, and yet they know more than us. I feel it when I see what my children are doing and I think that they have no chances of learning anything smart at school, only during private tutoring sessions, and that’s no different from school anyway.*

Or, in a traditional sense it should focus on providing reliable and career-related knowledge, “and not pretend, that it is teaching” – as one of the participants stated:

*Good education? That’s a good question. I’m not a pedagogist but a parent and accountant, who after many years is studying economy though I don’t have to. I always did well at school, **but school***

⁴ I am intentionally referencing the work of E. Pulticka & J. Rutkowiak (2019), *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji*, Impuls, Kraków.

*does not transfer knowledge well, it doesn't teach thinking, and it definitely doesn't teach how to do various things. Maybe what has to change is to know how to apply this knowledge after school, to teach practically. In my profession it is important, and I know that for my children it would also be important. We are constantly doing homework with our children and not because they are somehow delayed, but because they simply aren't coping, and we have to supervise them. I have one child in university, I myself am studying and have two children in primary school and this is very difficult. The oldest one is very happy that he doesn't have to go to primary school. Like me, he thinks that he is only now really learning because it is in line with his interests. **Although he also has to cram a lot and has tests and exams, he knows that it is important to learn chemistry because it is necessary when one wants to make cosmetics. It would be good if it wasn't only based on memorisation but also on thinking.***

This language of obligation, which is used by the subjects, results from the criticism of the education that they themselves experienced which is why they demand this standard in two ways. The first form of criticism speaks to the necessity of taking action, solving exercises and problems as a way of learning with the indication that this type of education is possible because they themselves participated in it while in higher education. This does not, however, mean that learning at institutions of higher education is an extraordinary process. It is the same teaching, except that it takes place on the basis of a more modern culture of studying, based on independently completing tasks, on using knowledge and skills formed during earlier phases of education:

My children cram and pass tests all the time. I'm glad that I am studying rather than going to school. When I think about how many more tests my children have to bear in order to go to university, I know from personal experience – only then will they feel that they are taking action, solving something.

*There is no good education without a generally well thought out school. I never had doubts about my efforts being squandered by teachers. If I had gone to university after high school, I would have never seen that it can be interesting. **I came upon a great team at the polytechnic, we have a project, we are constantly building something. It's a new world, schools should be that way from the beginning, task-based, they should teach how to solve problems, this has only become possible here.***

The second variant of criticism towards schooling is questioning the accomplishment of basic tasks by the school in relation to the implementation of the curriculum, which is what it was appointed to do:

*Good education is a school that accomplishes what it has to. **Let it be old fashioned, or how do they say it now – conservative, let it teach memorisation, cramming, let it impose required reading and check, but let it do so well rather than pretend that it does all this. I don't have illusions that anything is going to change.** Teachers won't work well, because we pay them poorly. Something that is for the masses will never be good and this is where the problem stems from.*

The accusation that appears here, of a school “not coping” with different students – their competences, interests and abilities, is presented as an obstacle to it meeting its

commitments. A school loses out on this because it cannot work effectively, and the student loses out because he/she is ignored or simply not noticed:

Good education probably happens in those interesting new non-public schools, or, what are they called, private? In public schools there are no chances if you have a child who is a bit different from the others. I, for example, study psychology because I don't know what to do with my own child. A good education is one that serves my child even though they are different, and not one that lumps everyone together. Anyway, such a child is a problem for the school, it lowers the school's performance in class rankings, it needs additional care which is always troublesome.

In all these excerpts the subject of criticism is not the content of education or the curriculum, but the fear that they are not implemented in the right way and through the use of incorrect methods. From the perspective of didactics, one can say that it is not about the sense or aims of education but only about the instruments leading to the accomplishment of tasks by a school. Speaking in the language of educators, schools are not sufficiently professional in providing learning conditions for students, they insufficiently recognise pupils needs related to ways of learning – as Malcolm Knowles (1981) would say.

What is characteristic here is the way of describing the actions of schools through the prism of "inaction", which may indicate the subject's perception of its dysfunctional basic function in a way that a school doesn't manage to implement the curriculum and does not prepare pupils to adjust to the role of being a student. Bringing attention to these issues shows that the functional nature of a school's tasks is a reference to "good education". We repeat, in this category "good education" means a good school that fulfils two functions: implements the curriculum and accustoms pupils (including adults) to the role of a student.

Good education as an instrument for achieving a successful professional career and obtaining a better economic status

From this angle, good education is seen as a ready product (a type of education and professional competences), which one should choose while rationally judging whether it should be bought, taking into account one's own resources (talent, effort) in order to arrive at a transaction (undertaking the right education). Good education is a type of investment for the future chosen in line with one's aspirations and capabilities, but also with consideration for society's economic growth and, at the same time, individual economic prosperity. The effort of "assessing" the possibilities of a transaction corresponds to the descriptive language of a rational and pragmatic individual, which makes the right decisions so as to guarantee their own success – mostly economic success:

Whether education is good or bad can be seen based on how much you earn and what you do. If you are a doctor or an engineer, then you have chosen well. I would like for my children to choose good professions because then you don't have to worry about them. I chose construction, but I owned a company and was doing well. I know that you can do anything if you want it and work hard.

*It's not profitable to invest in something which does not have a future. Good education does not mean studying humanities. There are politicians who believe that these types of studies should be limited for taxpayer's money and I agree with that. **One must be useful, then you earn money and can manage well in the future.** I would like for my children to have it better than me, now my wife and I are planning, not studies for them, but we are developing their interests. I think that even if they decide to go to university later on, like me, that that wouldn't be bad, first practice and drones like in my case, then studies.*

In life, you have to know how to manage, how to be financially independent, that is why you have to know how to evaluate your chances. A good education is one that is adequate to your capabilities and not above them because then you are headed for trouble and failure. In order to avoid that, you have to be aware of what you know and what you don't know, and to know what school and university to choose even when you are already an adult. Then you have success.

In the excerpts above, the economic language used to describe good education is in a way neutralised. Education which in the future brings a measurable profit is something obvious, it is not problematised, it simply determines its essence (importance). That is why one's individual choice as to the types of competencies, which are precisely defined, is a basic task here, and not the sharing of doubts as to the importance of the knowledge and skills acquired throughout the education process. The clear attitude towards the effects of education is combined with the conviction that education that is properly planned out (calculated) always brings success. One could say that what follows is a type of “privatisation” of the macrosocial aims of education which when interpreted well by an individual brings prosperity, development and a career. **The mechanism of adjustment as a regulator of individual behaviours** plays a key role in reaching success in life by the individual.

Good education as an instrument for enlightenment

In this descriptive category, education/school is considered good if it is able to prevent various dramas in an individual and universal sense. In terms of development it should prevent addiction, in terms of curriculum it should warn against the dire consequences of war, ecological catastrophes and social conflict:

*A good education is one that leads to no war, poverty, to us not killing each other. We don't spend much time on this, well, maybe now we make sure to eat healthily, look pretty and have a healthy lifestyle. We can see a bit that computers aren't everything, that kids are buying drugs in the same way we bought candy. **A good education has to protect them from these dangers.***

A hundred years have passed since the first world war, the second world war also appears in our memories on certain anniversaries, we have to remind the youth of this tragedy so that it doesn't repeat itself. Now schools have changed their curriculum – I can see it through my children because they are constantly running to the academy. We have to warn them all the time or we might end up being surprised.

I study history and know that sometimes small events trigger huge conflicts including genocide. We should definitely draw conclusions and sensitise the youth and teach them to not be easily

manipulated. Good education means teaching caution, thinking critically, asking questions. After many years I am studying again. I will not be a teacher and don't want to be one, I am doing this for myself. Now, when my children are in secondary education I've decided to start studying and they are rooting for me. **Good education gives broad knowledge, so that bad things do not occur. So that we don't create conflicts, don't poison ourselves, and have fresh air to breathe.**

The basis of this enlightenment is the necessity of having to understand one's identity in the context of belonging to a cultural and national circle so that we know how we differ from others:

*Good education is such, that teaches us where we are from. **That is why schools should teach an attachment to our tradition, history and church, without this we shouldn't go out in the world.** How else would we know that we are Poles and what ancestors have shaped us?*

An essential part of this is the formation of an awareness that in the modern world others have different lifestyles – which should not be surprising to us. This awareness enriches us cognitively, perhaps it teaches a humbleness towards one's own culture and does not allow for ignorance towards others, but most of all it serves as a foundation for a well-educated person:

Good education is the simple message that people are different and that there are different cultures and places in which people live and think differently.** I am studying film studies and am constantly having discussions about how we are not the most important in the world, that somewhere on the other side of Africa there live interesting people who we could learn from. My young colleagues don't understand this, they go on trips, but it seems like they never leave the hotel. I have the impression that there is a gap between us. I know that I am older and have more experience, and I sometimes feel like their mother rather than like a friend from university. They speak different languages, but I wonder what they are talking about. **Sometimes it has to be explained to them** that for example, people may not want to have a so-called career, or make huge amounts of money but that they simply want to know more and feel good, maybe to build up their self-esteem. **If you want to be well educated you have to know this.

The condition for good education is a good teacher that knows how to use effective tools to implement the curriculum:

Good education means a good teacher, who knows how to transfer knowledge, knows their students and has good professional operational knowledge, only this type of teacher can be effective.

The domain of enlightenment captured here is the art of persuasion, clarification, and providing advanced knowledge in such a way that ultimately results in a permanent change in the thinking and actions of a student or students. It is more about the ways of inciting this change rather than the content or overall meaning. **Good education is knowing more in order to be able to predict and take control of the world in which we live.**

Teaching methods as a domain of the description of “good education”

This short description of the reconstructed modes of thinking about good education by adults brings an awareness that in regards to public reception education is thought about in terms of teaching methods, which means that it is treated as the provider of “conditions for learning” or as an environment created for persuasion. One can say that this fits well with the perception of education as a service – a service that is well selected and personalised, adapts the individual to the world and which, by those in the field of education, is shown as objectively provided. Presumably, it always comes down to social and economic progress, and the measure of this type of development is the level of an individual’s adjustment to fulfill social and professional roles. There is also one more important element of this type of understanding – if something is failing either socially or economically then the cause is education, in the sense of the employment of a “wrong method”, one which hasn’t been adjusted to the problems of the real world, or which “can’t keep up with them”. The temptation to perceive within this method the causes of success and explanations for failure is scientifically substantiated. It fits well with the actions through which a teacher (subject) changes its pupil (subject) in alignment with pre-defined goals⁵. At school, across generations, the notion was instilled in us that there is a strong relationship between the procedure (teaching) and the guarantee of the civilisational development of society, that the objectivity of knowledge is ensured through the use of scientific knowledge (teaching methods during class), and that the success of a schools effects is measured by evaluating the level of adjustment of a student to the existing world. When combined with the pressure that is placed on economic development and the hunger for economic success, we have built something that resembles an educational mentality that is based on the belief that beyond the technology of teaching there is no good education, and that without a good teaching method there is no modern school or developed society (see Malewski 2000).

Phenomenography studies the common ways of understanding the world, it captures in different forms the human conceptualisations of the different forms of experiencing it. Modes of experiencing education by the subjects demonstrated through open answers, structured according to the procedure of descriptive categories, allow for the observation of the instrumental treatment of education. It is clear that the focus is on the methods of good education rather than on the idea, on the effect rather than the sense, on the objective factors of success or failure of the individual rather than on seeking internal mechanism of learning as a matter of ethics (see Rutkowiak 2005, pp. 44-61). Perhaps,

⁵ A way of understanding education typical of scientific pedagogy, see J. Rutkowiak (1992).

culturally we have managed to create the conviction that a school is solely a channel for transmitting objective knowledge, meaning it is free of values as well as of its historicity and context, and instead what is relevant is the celebration of the here and now. Which is why, as per G.J.J. Biesta (2010), asking what it means that education is good and what it forces us to observe it and its justifications, tells us to look at its various meanings and ideas, allows us to move past individual experiences and particular interests and does not allow its meaning to be reduced to measurable effects in the form of acquired knowledge and skills. In reference to the previously mentioned empirical description of the categories that constitute the conception of “good education”, one can say that the functional image that became dominant is that of “good education” in which the aim is to adjust to the current world and take control over it. **It turned out that asking about “good education” did not activate in the adult’s statements descriptions in the context of the relation between man and the world in its ethical aspect, but solely in a cognitive aspect.** This results in the disappearance of the question about the quality of the world and the aims of education altogether. Therefore, it would now be important, as Joanna Rutkowiak claims, to understand that today the role of education within the situation of the complexity of the world is to care for this world. However, it can be added, that through our role as researchers and educators, (using the formulation of Zbigniew Kwieciński) we should try to “reclaim” the public and ethical meaning of education itself. This would come down to **attempting to argue about its essence (actually essences) within the public sphere**, this way we would create a habit of thinking about education as a value and not only as an instrumentally understood teaching method. The above description of the disclosed descriptive categories that make up the understanding of “good education” among mature students, who are also parents, is treated as a voice in this important matter.

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