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*Vocational Counsellor in the German School System:  
Historical and Institutional Context of the Profession*

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Doradca zawodowy w niemieckim systemie szkolnym. Historyczny i instytucjonalny  
kontekst zawodu

HOW TO QUOTE THIS PAPER: Zapotoczna, M. (2021). Vocational Counsellor in the German School System: Historical and Institutional Context of the Profession. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio J, Paedagogia-Psychologia*, 34(4), 205–215. DOI: 10.17951/j.2021.34.4.205-215.

ABSTRACT

The article describes the profile of a career counsellor against the background of historical changes in the orientation and vocational guidance system in Germany. The formal and legal conditions of the counseling profession were also described, due to the fact that in Germany there are no uniform legal regulations regarding the qualifications, training or professional status of persons providing career guidance. The results of the analysis carried out indicate that in the context of lifelong learning, education and career guidance is a link between the needs of citizens and the requirements of education and the labour market. The long tradition of well-established educational and vocational guidance in Germany is intertwined with dynamic socio-economic changes that generate new challenges for the guidance system, including the counseling profession.

**Keywords:** vocational counsellor; career guidance; orientation and vocational guidance system in Germany; the German school system

INTRODUCTION

The way of pursuing a career path depends on the availability and quality of the school system's performance. The possibility of choosing an educational offer according to one's own interests, possibilities and aspirations allows an individual

to create his or her educational and career path. In the German education system, career counselling already starts at the primary school stage.

The main task continued in general education is to not prepare or even direct students to pursue a career path, but to equip them with knowledge and competence that will enable them to choose the right path of professional development. The preparation process includes shaping appropriate aptitudes, recognising one's own competences, interests and talents, as well as gathering knowledge about work and professions as well as familiarizing with the regularities of the labour market and its requirements. Professional career counsellor, who is also a coordinator of activities supported by the school head, other teachers, parents of students and non-school institutions, provides professional help in this respect.

### TRANSFORMATION OF CAREER GUIDANCE OVER TIME

Career counselling for young people in Germany has a well-established tradition. The beginning of its institutionalization dates back to 1913 when the German Committee for Vocational Guidance (Deutscher Ausschuss für Berufsberatung) was created – at the initiative of the Social Welfare Center (Zentralstelle für Volkswohlfahrt) – the first public career guidance institution (Maier, 2006).

The increase in demand for professional and organised career counselling led to the issuing of the first ordinance by the government of Bavaria in 1917, according to which municipalities were obliged to organise career counseling centres for youth at existing labour offices. The main tasks of the established institutions were the placement of apprenticeships (*Lehrstellenvermittlung*) and cooperation with teachers. It is worth noting that the offer was equally directed at girls and boys, which resulted from the progressive demands of the women's movement.

An important event in the history of career guidance in Germany took place on 18 March 1919. The ministries of the individual federal states, i.e. the Ministry of Trade and Craft (Ministerium für Handel und Gewerbe), the Ministry of Science, Arts and Education (Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Volksbildung), the Ministry of Agriculture (Ministerium für Landwirtschaft) and the Ministry of the Interior (The Ministerium des Innern), issued a joint ordinance, which became the formal basis for establishing a state organisation of career guidance throughout Germany (see Pahl, 2012, p. 69).

In the second half of the 1950s, there was an intensive development of scientific research showing the relationships between the situation of young employees on the domestic labour market and social and historical conditions. The social effects of World War II confronted young people with many problems, a lack of proper professional preparation, a limited number of training places and employment prospects. The educational debate stressed the need to properly prepare young people to work in workplaces. Existing solutions were criticized as inadequate to the needs

of career guidance and not taking into account the results of scientific research in the scope of choosing a profession. The urgent call for reorganizing the career guidance system in both services and general education was made. Heinrich Abel, who in his publications addressed the issues of pre-vocational education, opted for extending school attendance for a year or two to prepare students for entering the labour market. This was to take place as part of a new school subject in the field of vocational orientation under the name Career Education (*Arbeitslehre*).

At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, formal and legal foundations were implemented introducing elements of the subject Career Education into general school programs (Dederling, 2002, p. 20). In 1969, the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Culture (Ständige Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder) recommended the content of the introduction to the choice of profession within the subject Career Education by the main schools (*Hauptschule*). Familiarity with theoretical foundations and practical activity of students, such as visits to workplaces and work placements, were to enable young people to orientate themselves in the basics of career and help them make a conscious decision about choosing a profession at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In 1970, in accordance with the recommendations of the German Educational Council (Deutscher Bildungsrat) regarding the structural plan, the tasks of all general education schools included educational and career guidance, which supplemented the professional pursuit within the subject of Career Education. In 1971, the framework agreement concluded between the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Culture and the Federal Employment Office obliged the Federal Employment Office to cooperate with general and vocational education institutions, as interpreted in law by the Employment Promotion Act (*Arbeitsförderungsgesetz*). The tasks of the Federal Labour Office were to maintain contact with schools in the area and to cooperate with teachers in the organisation of career guidance and educational placement. The federal-level framework agreement provided the basis for the creation of detailed guidelines and regulations by the federal states.

As a result, the federal government's recommendations were adopted by most federal states and used to develop their own guidelines on how to implement content in the field of employment studies, which in 1949–1990 differed in the western and eastern parts of the country. In most Federal Schools, professional orientation was included in school curricula in most schools. Most often, this subject appeared as an independent subject or was implemented as part of the subject Economy–Career–Technique (*WirtschaftvArbeit–Technik*, WAT). In addition, the elements of professional orientation were implemented in other subjects, such as the economy, politics (in Berlin), or during workplace practices and visits to workplaces (in North Rhine-Westphalia). In the east of the country, in the German Democratic Republic, professional orientation content was carried out in the form of polytechnic classes (*polytechnischer Unterricht*) as part of socialist education:

introduction to socialist production (*Einführung in die sozialistische Produktion*), technical drawing (*Technisches Zeichnen*) and production classes Technical (*Unterricht in der technischen Produktion*).

In 1974, the first report on the state of implementation of professional orientation by schools was published. It drew attention not only to the substantive content, but also to organizational issues. The report emphasises the need to strengthen cooperation between educational establishments and employment offices. The need to support young people in the transition from school to the labour market was also pointed out. Mandatory introduction to school programs of employment studies to all lower secondary schools (*Sekundarstufe I*) was recommended. These proposals were intended to help young people reach maturity to choose a profession (*Berufswahlreife*) defined in the report as “the qualification necessary to make the first educational and professional decision in the perspective of long-term individual career path planning” (Dibbern, Kaiser, Kell, 1974, p. 74). After a decade since the report was published, its authors emphasised that the publication significantly contributed to increasing the involvement and activity of institutions participating in preparing young people to enter the labour market in the development and testing of various working methods.

In the middle of the 1980s, as a result of dynamic economic changes, the labour market in Germany underwent a significant transformation. The introduction of new technologies and organisational structures, including forms of employment, faced employees and school graduates with new problems and needs, such as continuous improvement and updating of their qualifications and their flexibility. Therefore, the curriculum content of school professional orientation also required verification. The offers of non-school institutions, such as labour offices, Career Information Centres and workplaces, were used more and more often.

The understanding of professional orientation up to the 1990s was reduced to preparing young people for choosing a profession and making decisions about the educational and professional path (Butz, 2008, p. 47). In the educational debate, more attention was paid to the need to prepare students for general education rather than professional vocational schools as before. In 1992, the Permanent Commission of Education Ministers, the Federal Labour Office and the Conference of Rectors of Universities (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*) issued a joint recommendation on the cooperation of schools, vocational guidance institutions (*Berufsberatung*) and student (*Studienberatung*) in upper secondary education (*Sekundarstufe II*).

Currently, the content of career guidance and professional orientation is found in the core curricula of all lower and higher schools, although there are clear differences in the ways of implementing it:

1. In the main (*Hauptschule*), community (*Gesamtschule*) and special (*Sonderschule*) schools, preparation for choosing a profession takes place as part of

the subject Career Education, and professional orientation is an independent subject often implemented with company practice<sup>1</sup>.

2. In real schools (*Realschule*), content in the field of professional orientation is implemented in particular in final class programs as part of a separate subject Career Education or other classes, e.g., knowledge about society, economy and technology. In some federal states (Bavaria, Rhineland-Westphalia, Saarland, Saxony), elements of professional orientation also appear in German, politics or geography lessons. In addition, the apprenticeship and visits to workplaces fulfill the function of preparing for the labour market.
3. In gymnasiums (*Gymnasium*), concentration on content in the field of professional orientation occurs in classes 9–10, which are most often implemented as part of the subject knowledge of society (less often economy, technology), as well as during seminars and meetings with experts.

The decision on the choice of profession is part of the process of professional orientation extended during the course of time, which starts at the stage of elementary education within the orientation phase (*Orientierungsstufe*) and lasts throughout professional life (Famulla, 2007, pp. 231–251). Professional orientation is defined as a whole-life process consisting in the confrontation of the individual's interests, ideas, knowledge and abilities with the needs and requirements of the labour market (Famulla, Butz, 2005).

### THE STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION OF CAREER GUIDANCE IN GERMANY

The structure of career guidance in Germany reflects constitutional legislation on education and employment systems with the division of powers between national (federal), federal and local authorities. The high demand for counselling services has forced the diversification of counselling support in schools (Figure 1). The division of tasks and competences between central and lower-level authorities follows the principle of subsidiarity (Leschinsky, 2003, p. 173). The federal authority has limited responsibilities, which are set out by the central regulations regarding supervision, general directions of education, goals and content of teaching. The role of national governments is dominant, which leaves little room for independent decisions to the lower level authorities: regional and local (Hildebrandt, 2006, p. 90).

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<sup>1</sup> The exception are schools in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where preparation for the profession is carried out as part of the subject Technician and in Schleswig-Holstein, where this content is part of the program Economy-Politics.

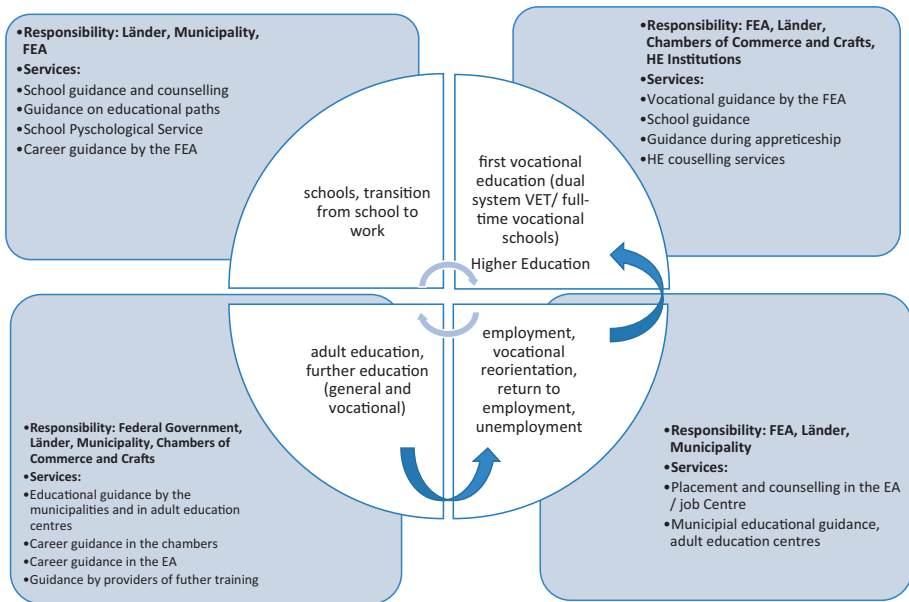


Figure 1. Educational, career and profession guidance in Germany

Source: (Jenschke, Schober, Langner, 2014, p. 7).

The professional orientation and guidance process in the educational system is governed by federal, state and local regulations (Frey-Huppert, Niemeyer, 2009). At the federal level, the Ministry of Labour, i.e. the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales), and the Ministry of Education, i.e. the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung), are responsible for the implementation of career guidance and counselling tasks. In accordance with the accepted division of responsibility of two ministries, cooperation is based on the framework agreement concluded in 2004 between the Federal Employment Agency and the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Culture (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004). Thus, employment agencies have a statutory obligation to conduct professional orientation in schools and to establish agreements with various partners to provide guidance services at all stages of education. The need to expand and strengthen various forms of cooperation was emphasised in the Preamble of the Framework Agreement between the Federal Employment Agency and the Standing Conference of Education Ministers, which states that “preparing young people to enter the world of work is not only the central task of schools and career guidance, but also economy and other local and regional entities” (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004, p. 3). The main goal is to prepare students to choose a profession and field of education and to support the process of youth transition from general education to vocational education, higher education or the labour market. An important

basis for counselling activities at the national level are also educational standards adopted by the Standing Conference of Education Ministers in 2003, 2004 and 2012 (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2012).

Supplementary agreements are signed at the level of individual federal states, as a result of which the federal states are legally obliged to provide comprehensive counselling for young people in school education and students. The basis for the functioning of career guidance and professional orientation in schools is governed by the provisions of the Acts on Education in Individual Länder (*Schulgesetzbuch*) issued by bodies at the union level, such as ministries of education, culture and science, regional authorities and lower-level authorities (Ständige Konferenz..., 2014).

At local level, schools and employment offices (*Arbeitsamt*) and the Career Information Centres reporting to them conclude contracts at local-level each year and are responsible for providing counselling and coordinating the services provided at schools, including the selection of appropriate methods, techniques and ways of organising career guidance.

In Germany, the vocational guidance and professional orientation system is characterised by a large variety of activities and a lack of terminological clarity. Counselling is based on the traditional distinction between educational guidance (*Bildungsberatung*) in the education sector and career (vocational) guidance (*Berufsberatung*) in the vocational training and employment sector (Strasser, 2013, pp. 203–213). However, given the growing importance of lifelong learning and the need to create adequate counselling offers, there is a need to abandon the traditional division of counselling in favour of integrated lifelong and interdisciplinary counselling activities. A condition for greater transparency and consistency of activities in this area is closer cooperation and networking of entities operating in the guidance system (Jenschke, Schober, Frübing, 2011, p. 6).

## CAREER COUNSELLOR AT SCHOOL

In the German model of career support, school activities in the field of professional orientation and information are conducted by teachers employed in the institution with a separate pensum for the implementation of tasks. School career counsellors conduct a series of meetings devoted to supporting students in making educational and professional decisions.

In Germany, there are no uniform legal regulations regarding the qualifications, training and professional status of individuals dealing with career guidance. Although the standards differ from one federal state to another, a general career counsellor can be a person with a university degree (bachelor's or master's degree), specialised training and pedagogical qualifications. The German Association for Vocational and Educational Counselling (Deutscher Verband für Bildungs- und Berufsberatung, DVB) attempted to set certain quality standards. Counsellors



who meet certain criteria can be registered in the counselling practitioner database (*BerufsBeratungsRegister*).

It is worth mentioning that under the project “Professionalisation of regional career guidance in Germany” (“Professionalisierung der regionalen Bildungsberatung in Deutschland”) a framework program for training career counsellors was created, which is a response to the specific needs of the regions. It focuses on counselling covering all educational aspects, counselling in networks and at the regional centre level. The course was created as part of a cooperation network at the regional level “Learning regions – supporting the network” (“Lernende Regionen – Förderung von Netzwerken”), supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

The intra-school career counselling system covers all the actions taken by the school to prepare students for the choice of education and future profession. The introduction of students to economic issues takes place as part of the compulsory subject Work Education (*Arbeitslehre*) implemented at the lower secondary school level (Symela, 1995, p. 150). In some federal states, this content may be part of material discussed in other classes, e.g., social, economic and economic knowledge. The program includes familiarizing students with the theoretical foundations of professional work, as well as practical classes in school workshops, trips to workplaces and career information centres, while older students are required to complete weekly apprenticeships in selected enterprises. Various forms of career counselling are offered at all levels of education, including counselling related to the choice of further education path or a particular type of school, support for students with learning difficulties, psychological help and professional orientation (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, 2010).

As a result of close cooperation between schools and employment agencies, the activities of school career counsellors are supported by specialists from the Federal Employment Agency who develop school counselling programs and actively engage in career counselling at schools. Pursuant to the provisions of educational law, employees of local employment offices are obliged to conduct at least two lessons in the field of professional orientation in schools and to organise at least one visit of students to the nearest Career Information Centre.

Lower-grade pupils participate in a series of meetings with a counsellor as part of professional pre-orientation classes (Kukla, 2010, p. 133). Attention should be paid to the effects of such solutions, such as placing professional help close to the student, increasing the accuracy of educational and professional decisions, and in a broader perspective, reducing social costs by improving the accuracy of choices made by students at subsequent levels of education. Introducing students to the problems of choosing a profession and educational paths is aimed at enabling young people to have better orientation in the content of education, requirements and possibilities of graduates of specific types of schools and to provide information on the current demand of the labour market and develop a positive attitude towards



work. Labour offices use specially prepared information brochures describing professions and studies or multimedia packages. Meetings are held in the form of group conversations, meetings with parents, exhibitions or lectures.

Pupils from the penultimate and last grades of lower secondary schools participate in career guidance courses, during which, in addition to information about professions and further education opportunities, young people learn to prepare application documents, learn self-presentation methods and find out about current job fairs, seminars on employment, etc. Classes are conducted partly in the form of group meetings, workshops, as well as individual conversations of the counsellor with the student, in which parents can also be present.

Also noteworthy is the extensive counselling in vocational schools in Germany, most fully developed in the dual education system (*duale Berufsausbildung*). Students realise theoretical content related to vocational preparation in schools, practical training workshops and at selected workplaces, thus having the opportunity to gain practical experience and learn the profession of their choice.

Currently, effective solutions in the field of professional orientation are being sought in general high schools, which will equip students with practical experience, help in determining their own predispositions and interests, and in the long run prepare young people to enter the labour market. An example of this kind of activities are student companies that, on the one hand, contribute to increasing the emphasis on developing practical skills and profiling education in terms of the current needs of the labour market, on the other, they are an important tool for the initial professional orientation of schoolchildren (Holtzhauer, 2013, pp. 4–10).

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#### ABSTRAKT

W artykule scharakteryzowano sylwetkę doradcy zawodowego na tle historycznych przemian systemu orientacji i poradnictwa zawodowego w Niemczech. Opisano również uwarunkowania formalno-prawne zawodu doradcy w związku z tym, że w Niemczech nie istnieją jednolite regulacje

prawne dotyczące kwalifikacji, szkolenia czy statusu zawodowego osób zajmujących się poradnictwem zawodowym. Wyniki przeprowadzonej analizy wskazują, że w kontekście uczenia się przez całe życie poradnictwo edukacyjno-zawodowe stanowi łącznik między potrzebami obywateli a wymogami edukacji i rynku pracy. Długa tradycja dobrze ugruntowanego poradnictwa edukacyjnego i zawodowego w Niemczech przeplata się z dynamicznymi zmianami społeczno-gospodarczymi, które generują nowe wyzwania względem systemu poradnictwa, w tym zawodu doradcy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** doradca zawodowy; poradnictwo zawodowe; system orientacji i poradnictwa zawodowego w Niemczech; niemiecki system szkolny