

How did vocational students become an economic interest? Media representation of Hungarian VET

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Abstract

Neoliberalism is becoming more dominant in education internationally. In Hungary, the marketisation of education is well illustrated by the government's 'Vocational Training in the Service of the Economy' development concept and the amendment of the vocational law. My main question is how the capitalist system reproduces itself through vocational education, with the support of neoliberal ideology. In my research I examine the online media representation of the 2011 and 2019 VET laws in terms of the news coverage of vocational education on the three most read online news portals in the three months before and after the laws were passed. The aim of the research was to identify which media actors emphasize the function of VET; which image of the student is associated with it; and whether the discourse on VET is dominated by a narrative of economic interest or a narrative of its critique. I analyzed 183 articles with the methods of content analysis and narrative analysis. The results show that narratives related to the economy are predominant, describing those in training as a resource that can be used in many ways, but never referring to them as students. In the conclusion I argue for the need for an anti-capitalist agenda for vocational education and training.

Keywords: *vocational education, labor, media representation, narrative analysis, critical pedagogy*

Introduction

The Prime Minister told the young people: “New factories, new company sites, new production centers have sprung up, and they are all counting on your work. We will give tax breaks to young people entering the labor market and to the companies that employ you, and we will support starting a family and creating a home, building and renovating a house,” he said. (...) You will not get a better offer from any other country - Orbán declared.” (24.hu, 2022)

In my research, I examine the relationship between vocational education and the economy. The relevance of the topic is given by the continued international attention to vocational education from organizations such as OECD, which most recently published a paper on 'Work-based learning and the green transition' in collaboration with Cedefop, the ILO, the ETF and UNESCO (Cedefop, 2022). In Hungary, VET has undergone significant changes in the last 12 years, in which the economy and its actors have played a major role (Mártonfi, 2019).

I investigate what articles have been published about Hungarian vocational education during the period of its transformation: 1). how actors associated with VET comment on the purpose; 2). the function of training and 3).the dominant discourse about VET and the image of the vocational education students. It is significant to examine the presence of the economy in VET and the desirable relationship between the two, especially at a time when vocational education and training is expected to reduce poverty and unemployment in the face of precarious work (Pantea, 2019).

. An analysis of the social representation of on vocational training and two recent legislative changes affecting it is important to explore how different actors in society perceive the institution and what they think its purpose is. In the first part of the paper, I will briefly describe what characterizes the relationship between education and economy in neoliberal capitalism, first on a global level and then in the Hungarian context. Then I present my research and

highlight the dominant narratives in VET and summarize my conclusions: 1). the need for an anti-capitalist agenda for vocational education, and 2). possible alternatives based on critical pedagogical approaches.

Education and economy on a global level

One of the most important statements in the critical tradition is that education reproduces and legitimizes the capitalist mode of production and its inequalities: 1). it educates for wage labor by the knowledge it transmits and the way it transmits it, and by the dominant ideology it conveys to its students; 2). for capitalism education is a tool in the process of commodifying human labor power and ensuring that the student will be valuable in production; 3). education therefore produces the labor power that is needed for the capitalist economic system (Hill, Greaves and Maisuria, 2009).

Its dominant ideology, neoliberalism: 1) redefines our concepts of education, reduces it to preparation for work (Ball, 2016); 2) strengthens connections with economic institutions - IMF, OECD - who also have influence on education, for example by defining which skills are important (Hill, Greaves and Maisuria, 2009); 3) as a result, market-friendly policies - e.g. privatization - are being implemented (Klees, 2020).

It is worth highlighting the human capital theory, which reinforces neoliberal ideology and is crucial for vocational education and training. The theory argues that education is an instrument of employability and should be seen as an investment that increases an individual's skills and productivity in the labour market, thus providing a return in both economic and individual terms (Griffiths, Robertson, 2021). The economic theory according to Klees (2017) and Griffiths and Robertson (2021) can be characterized by a belief in economic development, individualism, the use of the individual's labor power in the labor market, and a strong link between education and employability.

As in neoliberal ideology, the belief in economic development is the dominant starting point of human capital theory (Griffiths, Robertson, 2021). The promise that the more developed the society and the economy, the better the life for its members. The causal link between economic development and an increase in people's well-being is posited as a necessity, but it is far from being one. Development can be unequal, if it benefits only certain members of society, it leads to further inequalities. As Vandermoortele (2009) writes, profit rates can be high even if they are accompanied by a reduction or stagnation of the average worker's income, with only certain classes seeing their wages rise. To give an example, in the United States, executive pay increased by 45 percent between 2003 and 2007, while for the average worker the increase was less than 3 percent (Vandemoortele 2009). However, as the basic idea of human capital theory is that economic development is the key to a well-functioning society and the well-being of the individual, it follows that it is the individual's responsibility to contribute to economic development. This individualist conception of society is a defining point of human capital theory. It is the individual's responsibility to be employable, to acquire and 'invest' the skills needed for employment, to choose the right educational institution to gain these skills. All he has to do is make 'good' choices, rational decisions (Griffiths, Robertson, 2021). This raises several problems. First, people do not have the same information about the world, the current needs of the labor market, educational institutions. The presence/absence of this information is influenced by factors such as the individual's cultural capital and network of contacts, which also play a role e.g., in school choice (Ee-Seul Yoon, 2019). Why should an individual be expected to make a rational decision unless he or she has the relevant information and the prerequisites to acquire this information? At the level of nation states, this impossible expectation is equally evident. Griffiths and Robertson (2021) write about the misconception that all nations are capable of development, if only the right policies are adopted. If we look at it from the

perspective of world systems theory, the organizing principle of capitalism is that capital also accumulates in the centrum countries by regrouping them from semi-periphery to periphery, which means exploiting countries (Griffiths, Robertson, 2021). Uneven spatial and geographic development is an inherent feature of capitalism (Tímár, 2016).

Another problem is that the link between education and employability is not as the theory paints it, mere education does not guarantee a job. Even if some people are able to make the 'right' choices and invest in their education, if all people get a degree in the same subject, which is a niche in the economy, that degree will quickly become devalued. As a result, people have to get higher and higher certificates for the same jobs (Griffiths and Robertson, 2021).

Nevertheless, human capital theory defines what counts as valuable knowledge: that which is usable in the labor market. It makes knowledge dependent on the labor market, while the demands of the market are constantly changing according to what capital considers valuable. Education becomes nothing more than a means to get something in return (Juafer 2021). This would mean that knowledge is not a value in itself but is made so by circumstances.

All this leads to the main problem: that human capital theory distracts attention from systemic problems and even blames them on the wrong choices of the individual. Structural unemployment is inherent in the capitalist economic system (Klees, 2017), and not only the individual, but the education system by itself, cannot change this, nor can it provide answers to all problems that have their roots in wider socio-economic problems (Griffiths and Robertson, 2021).

VET is more closely linked to the labor market because of its specificity, the 'privilege' of teaching a particular trade. It thus has a traditional role in employability, and the principles of human capital and productivity promotion permeate the whole international understanding of vocational education and

training (Juafer, 2021). In addition, training has a role to play in improving the employability of the poor, as shown by the review of the vocational education and training system in the European Commission's 2019 report, which aims to make it more responsive to labor market needs.

The dominant view of employability in education makes it difficult to criticize the labor market, to which education is expected to adapt. It distracts attention from examining the nature of the system for which young people should be trained, to try to imagine work and the economy differently by revealing systemic inadequacies and injustices (Griffiths, Robertson, 2021). It is also worth examining models that are based on the withdrawal of human labor from capitalist production, on the abolition of wage labor: e.g., models based on a solidarity economy. If we prepare young people in school for the world of work as if every current characteristic of it were an unquestionable law, we are - even if we do so with good intentions - only teaching them to adapt, and thus maintaining the existing system (Simon 1983). The task of education is twofold: it must teach us to function in the existing world, but it must also enable us to imagine another.

Targeting Vocational Education and Training

Vocational training has a specific role to play in maintaining capitalism because of the ideological function of the school and the task assigned to it in the production of future labor. Althusser (1970), in his Ideological State Apparatuses theory, points out that the reproduction of the conditions and relations of production takes place through the state apparatus, through social institutions such as schools, which transmit ideology. The school reproduces the labor force that sustains the system, in a way that can be put to work in the production process: vocational training provides the skills and knowledge needed to conduct specific jobs. According to Althusser, the reproduction of

labor skills is increasingly taking place outside production, in schools through the capitalist education system. It is worth examining this point in the present day, when the dual vocational training system is widespread, as it allows 'learning' to take place within production, in companies. It is important to stress that it is not only skills that are reproduced in school, but also morals, the practical implementation of the dominant ideology. In effect, the capitalist work ethic, adapted to the various agents of production, the wage laborer's ethic, based on the skills to be learned in vocational training, the limits of the curriculum.

According to Althusser, in the capitalist economy, the ruling class hides its ideology behind the liberating, egalitarian quality of education. Establet and Baudelot (Backer, 2022) point out that the illusion of thinking of schooling as a unified system helps to maintain the ideology of the ruler. They use educational data from 1968 in France to show that there are two major school systems in France: upper-secondary and general-vocational. School drop-out rates are examined in terms of the period during which pupils crumble in the primary-secondary-university split presented as unitary - who gets to university, who stays in vocational preparation. This division, which determines which students end up where in the labor market, points to the fact that there are in fact two systems, the division of school contributing to the reproduction and class division of society.

The focus on vocational training in Hungary is part of an international trend. Following, the neoliberal turn of the 1970s (Harvey, 2007), education is being marketized in many parts of the world. Vocational training also has a role to play through the lens of neoliberal ideology, with the market becoming more important and the internationalization of capital increasing the demand for skilled labor. VET is dominated by a functionalist perspective, designed to provide labor to the economy (Bulut, 2014) and thus easily becomes central

when it comes to the needs of the labor market and the shaping of the workforce.

Regarding the centrum countries, in the 1980s the term ‘New Vocationalism’ emerged in England, with the Conservative government urging a reform of the training due to the country's economic situation (Imre, 1995). In Germany, after the adoption of the Vocational Training Act of 1969, dual training based on a partnership between school and business was officially developed (Pritchard, 1992). This gave the opportunity to formalize the relationship between capital and school and to make it a model for other countries. The various functions of education - education for social life, critical thinking, etc. - everything else that could be the basic purpose of an educational institution is being squeezed out, these interests are not represented through partnerships. The latter is crucial for the interpretation of the Hungarian context, as the government considers the German dual system as an example to follow (Mártonfi, 2019).¹ We are not alone in this: since 2012, six European countries have been testing the introduction of the dual system based on the ‘*Memorandum on Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training in Europe*’ signed with the European Commission (Gessler and Howe, 2013). The German dual system consists of practical training and apprenticeship in a company and academic training in schools. In a 3-year apprenticeship, young people sign an apprenticeship contract with the company that hires them and spend 70% of their practical training time at the company (where they get paid a wage) and the rest at school (Eckelt and Schmidt, 2015; Cedefop, 2023). Eckelt and Schmidt (2015) discuss in detail the downside of dual training and the need to end its hegemony. Simon (1983) discusses how vocational education and training can challenge the dominant narrative of the world of work, ways of educating young people not only to adapt and thus to recreate the system. To break hegemony, he proposes a method of critical pedagogy, the practice of asking empowering

questions about work (such as: how the nature of work affects people's satisfaction) and incorporating these into teaching. Acknowledging the power of hegemony and the difficulty of incorporating critique into the system, he says, drawing on his research with vocational education students, that the personal relationship between teacher and student in vocational education can still be relied upon, and identifies the vocational teacher as someone who may be able to critique the labor market as it moves between the worlds of school and work.

The situation is not only in the center countries mentioned above, from South America to Turkey neoliberal tendencies and laws characterize education (Aksoy, 2015). The processes in Turkey are remarkably similar to those in Hungary. By the way in which the country's competitiveness is made dependent upon the success of VET. Particularly to revealing concepts such as *'Vocational Education is the Issue of Our Country'* protocol signed between the Ministry of Education and influential economic actors (Bulut, 2014).

Changes in Hungarian VET

Hungarian vocational education has gone through massive changes in the last 12 years. In 2010, newly elected ruling party, FIDESZ started to rewrite education: one important document was the *'Széll Kálmán plan'*, which is about the country's fight against national debt. It mentions vocational education, where children are being trained *"unnecessarily long"* and *"in the wrong direction"*, while there is a shortage of labor in the manual trades, which is one of the reasons for the increased debt (Government Of The Republic Of Hungary, 2011).

After the document and newly presented work-based society narrative, they changed the vocational law, first in 2011 then in 2019. The main changes based on Mártonfi's article (2019) *'Educational governance and structural change in national vocational education after 2010'* are the following:

- 1) While previously the Ministry of Education was responsible for the sector, in 2010, it was transferred to the Ministry of National Economy and in 2018, to the Ministry of Innovation and Technology (from 2022 it belongs to the newly formed Ministry of Culture and Innovation).
- 2) Its structure changed: part of the training has been shortened, the age of compulsory education has been lowered from 18 to 16 years, general studies are reduced, scholarships are increased.
- 3) In 2015 the government released a development concept called *'Vocational Training in the Service of the Economy'*.

The expectations of VET and the outcomes expected from reforms, corresponds to the concept of educational gospel by Grubb and Lazerson (2006, quoted in Vajda, 2013), which describes the belief in the omnipotent power of education. Regarding, the changes in vocational education in Hungary, neoliberal ideology can be observed in the placing of training under the economic sector, and the capitalist logic in the way they determine what kind of labor is needed.

Those who are affected by the changes - VET students in Hungary

In Hungary, two thirds of the secondary school students - more than 200.000 - attend vocational education. Students in VET come from lower social classes and enter the training with weaker academic performance. It is important to underline that several studies have shown a strong correlation between students' family background and their performance in Hungary. According to the Hungarian National Competence Measurements, 22-27% of students' performance is explained by their family background, as discussed in Fehérvári's book (2014) *"Vocational training and social transformation"*.

The differences between gymnasium (grammar school or high school) and vocational education and the hierarchy between the two secondary school types

have a historical tradition. After the 1989 regime change, school types became more homogeneous, gymnasiums became even more accessible to various elite groups, while children from lower educational backgrounds were locked into vocational education (Fehérvári, 2014). Social inequalities are not only reproduced in educational inequalities by students with lower economic and cultural capital performing less well, but also participating in other types of educational programs based on their social class.

The situation of Roma students in Hungarian secondary education is characterized by a strong drop-out rate: by the early 2010s, Roma students were 20 percentage points behind non-Roma students in vocational secondary education. The reasons for this gap are accumulated disadvantages before secondary school, weak general basic education, and social isolation in schools (Hajdú, Kertesi and Kézdi, 2015). There are a number of reasons for the disadvantages in primary school, one of them is the correlation between the proportion of Roma pupils and the number of qualified teachers in schools: schools over-represented by Roma pupils have more teachers without qualifications (Papp, 2011) - which also suggests a difference in the quality of education.

To conclude, there is a strong emphasis on the link between education and the economy at the level of legislation and government documents, which affects two thirds of Hungarian young people of secondary school age, typically those from deprived backgrounds.

The research: media representation of Hungarian VET

From a social and educational point of view, it is important to understand the manifest and latent aims of vocational training, and how it affects those who take part in it. An analysis of the social representation of VET could be useful in

this respect: to explore how different actors in society perceive the institution and what they think its purpose is.

In my research I examine the online media representation of the 2011 and 2019 VET laws in terms of the news coverage of VET on the three most read online news portals: *Origo*, *Index*, *24.hu*.

The main aim of the research was to identify

- 1) Which media actors emphasize the function of vocational education and which functions do they emphasize?
- 2) What narratives can be identified about vocational training?
- 3) What is the emerging image of students in relation to VET?

My research questions are about the media representation of the 2011 and 2019 Vocational Education and Training Act, and the examined data are from the most read online news portals in this time period. According to the audience measurement data of the Digital Audience Measurement Council, *Origo*, *24.hu* and *Index* are the most read online news portals in 2011 and 2019, in different order. In designing the criteria, it was important to have a comparable sample, so the search was for online news portals that existed and were active in both 2011 and 2019. Considering the media environment in Hungary today, it is not at all obvious that a leading news portal in 2011 will still exist in 2019. On the Hungarian media scene, it is worth highlighting that FIDESZ, led by Viktor Orbán, has fundamentally transformed the media. The first point of this was the 2010 Media Act, which restricted freedom of the press immediately after the party came to power. (The Media Act was followed by the 2011 Public Education Act and Vocational Training Act, which started the transformation of public education.) The restriction of press freedom was followed by the takeover of public media, commercial TV and then the buyout of the print and

online newspaper market, with the previously independent *Origo* and *Index* being major players. In 2018, the Central European Press and Media Foundation (*KESMA*) was created, which owns 500 centrally run national and local media organizations (Csatári - Fábián, 2021). *Index*'s takeover and the resistance of journalists has already been reported in the international press (Thorpe, 2020), eventually being bought by business interests close to FIDESZ in 2020 (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Today, according to a report by Reporters Without Borders (2022), Hungary is 85th in the press freedom ranking. The report also highlights the government linked *KESMA Foundation*. Independent media are also present, including the *24.hu* site, which I also examined. So, based on the above, all three of the news sites examined in the research were still considered independent at the time of the 2011 Vocational Education and Training Act, but this changed by the time of the 2019 VET Act, when *Origo* was already part of the government-affiliated foundation. A year after the research, *Index* was also taken over by businessmen close to FIDESZ, so that now only *24.hu* is among the most read online newspapers. This naturally raises the issue of media hegemony. Power and the symbolic elite can control public discourse and its access, to manipulate the public (Van Dijk 2011), by determining the content and its dominant representation (Block 2013). What media hegemony means in practice: more than twice as many government figures are quoted in articles about the 2019 law, opposition politicians and trade unions no longer appear in the *Origo*.

The period examined in the research is the three months before and after the publication of the laws, so for the Vocational Education and Training Act promulgated on 27 December 2011, I examine content published from August 2011 to March 2012, and for the Vocational Education and Training Act promulgated on 28 November 2019, I examine content published from August 2019 to February 2020. In the news portal search database, I look at content

published for the keyword 'vocational training'. Out of 257 articles published for the search keyword 'vocational training', 242 articles were analyzed. Fifteen articles were excluded from the basic sample because reading through their content revealed that they did not contain the term 'vocational training'. Further selection is made during the analysis of the sample. Based on the content of the articles, 59 additional articles were not considered relevant because they were not about vocational education and training in Hungary (VET related to higher education was not examined).

The content obtained from the search was analyzed by creating a database using quantitative and qualitative tools. As a result of the content analysis, not only the groups and their representatives in the vocational training space became visible, but also who among the actors and with what frequency they are mentioned, in which context and in what other fields they mention vocational training. The analysis also revealed the interest groups linked to vocational training.

My main aim was to explore the narratives, underlying contents, and ideologies in articles about vocational education and training and its legislative changes. Discourse and narrative analysis help to understand the function and role of social phenomena by examining the deeper layers of the text: language use, expressions, and actors (Géring, 2017). Critical discourse analysis provides a suitable methodology for the analysis of ideologies and complex social meanings in text. In his paper *Discourse and ideology* (2011), Teun A. van Dijk explains the relationship between ideology and discourse and their manifestation in writing, and the tools of critical discourse analysis. He defines ideologies as collections of thoughts, general beliefs shared by groups, which influence how we interpret social events and situations. Dominant ideologies are also reproduced through institutions, such as schools and mass media, communication within or through them helps to assimilate ideologies. Ideology

is thus a form of social understanding and thus has the capacity to guide our discourses, which van Dijk (2011) describes as practical manifestations of ideology. The media, articles in the media, are public discourses through which ideologies are better articulated, have great persuasive power, and are easily reproduced in everyday life. Text and speech-based data are suited to studying ideologies, the content of ideologies can be best presented and argued as messages. This demonstrates the value of examining popular media products to see what discourses they present through their narrators, through their journalism, and the ideologies they reproduce.

Ideological discourse analysis is the analysis of how categories specific to ideology appear in discourse, how schemes and semantic categories are expressed, such as group identity, the emergence of norms and values, the definition of right and wrong, the defense of certain resources, rhetorical devices, metaphors, and the representation of contexts. In the analysis, it is important to pay attention to the phenomena in the text that express ideological convictions, the context: who is talking about what and to whom, when and with what purpose (van Dijk 2011). By examining the discourses on the changes in the Vocational Training Act, this was precisely my aim, to find out what the different actors think about training and the changes it entails, what purposes and tasks they assign to it, and what narratives these together form.

To analyze the content and narratives, I created codes based on literature, which were continuously expanded as I read the content during the research. Finally, I identified eight main categories and their subcategories. Under the category 'Law', I coded whether a law was mentioned in the article under study and, if so, whether positive, negative, or neutral opinions about the law were expressed. I created the category 'Area' to examine other areas mentioned in the articles in relation to vocational education and training. Under the category 'Actors', I coded references to individuals, specific individuals and institutions mentioned

in the articles. To define the 'Function' code and the subcategories within it, I used the functions attributed to education and their definitions in Gábor Halász's work *The Education System* (Halász 2001), supplemented with new elements that emerged from reading the articles. Closely related to this is the 'Task' code, where I examined the tasks attributed to vocational education and training in the articles. Along the 'Problem' category, I looked at the problems that are mentioned in the articles studied in relation to vocational training.

I coded the articles using content analysis software, Atlas.ti.

Results of the research

In the coding process I identified 8 main codes, and their subcodes. The most important ones are the following: *actors, function and task of VET, narratives, and student image*. The quotes in this study are from the reviewed articles.

The actors - who's talking about vocational education?

Under the category of actors, I coded references to individuals, specific individuals and institutions who appear or speak in the 183 articles.

The most frequent actors were *the members of the government (183/107), pro-government politicians (183/24), and Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (183/18)*. They all support the changes in vocational training. Although there was one pro-government politician, who opposed the changes, mostly from labor market considerations. He fears that the shortening of training will make it more like on-the-job training “*training children for a specific job, who will not be suitable for any other job*” (Origo, 2011).

Another noticeable actor is *unions (183/24)*, their role is very interesting in the articles. In the majority of articles, teachers' unions speak out about the 2019 law. According to the law, vocational education teachers got deprived of their status as public servants and were subjected to the Labor Code, being called

trainers instead of teachers. The change of status of VET teachers is in line with the neoliberal trends in education globally. The direct effect of this change is that vocational teachers are now subject to market rules. According to government communication, this will mean that they will earn more (“competitive salaries”), which is an incentive for good professionals to teach in schools. According to the trade unions, however, this means easier dismissals and the withdrawal of bonuses. The symbolic effect of the change may be that the state no longer regards them as public servants, i.e., teaching as a public task. It is also symbolic that they are being renamed from teachers to trainers, implying that the task will not be to educate or to work as educators, but to transfer professional skills.

Trade union’s statements can be seen as positive, because they try to defend their workers, but they only speak once about the impact of the changes on students.

These were the main actors. The silent ones are the *students and teachers* (not in a collective form as unions but as experts in their profession), *educational researchers* are not interviewed - this also raises the question of media hegemony, who is interviewed and whose opinion matters. Theories of media hegemony acknowledge that there is a link between media and social issues, and that media play a role in shaping meanings and values. Due to its social formative power, the media also functions as a power field where groups struggle for recognition (Block, 2013). As Block (2013) cites, Couldry (2010) introduces the notion of media as 'voice', which becomes a space where people struggle for recognition, spaces of voice become spaces of recognition. An examination of the articles on the VET Act reveals who has no voice in the issue: education experts, students, parents. Teachers are represented through their representative body, the trade union, to a greater extent. However, it should be noted that although the media can generate symbolic power, this does

not necessarily imply a de facto manifestation of power, a change in the balance of power. Teachers' unions have repeatedly raised their voices against the changes in vocational education and training - predominantly because of the loss of the status of teachers as civil servants - but this has not been successful in the sense that the government has not changed the points of the law that are contested.

Identifying student image and the narratives in the articles are more complex categories than others. By student image, I am analysing what is stated about students in the article or by the person speaking in the article, what adjectives and characteristics are mentioned, how students in vocational education and training are referred to. Under the narrative code, I examine the deep layers of the text, what interests and goals can be identified on the basis of the various categories that appear in the content. In addition to the narratives related to economic and equal opportunities in the research hypothesis, a number of new categories have emerged.

The function of vocational education and the tasks associated with it To define the codes for the function of VET, I used the functions attributed to education in Halász's book (2001) *The Education System*. I extended the codes with new elements that emerged from reading the online articles. To get a more complex picture, I also present the tasks attributed to VET that appear in the definition of a specific function (Table 1).

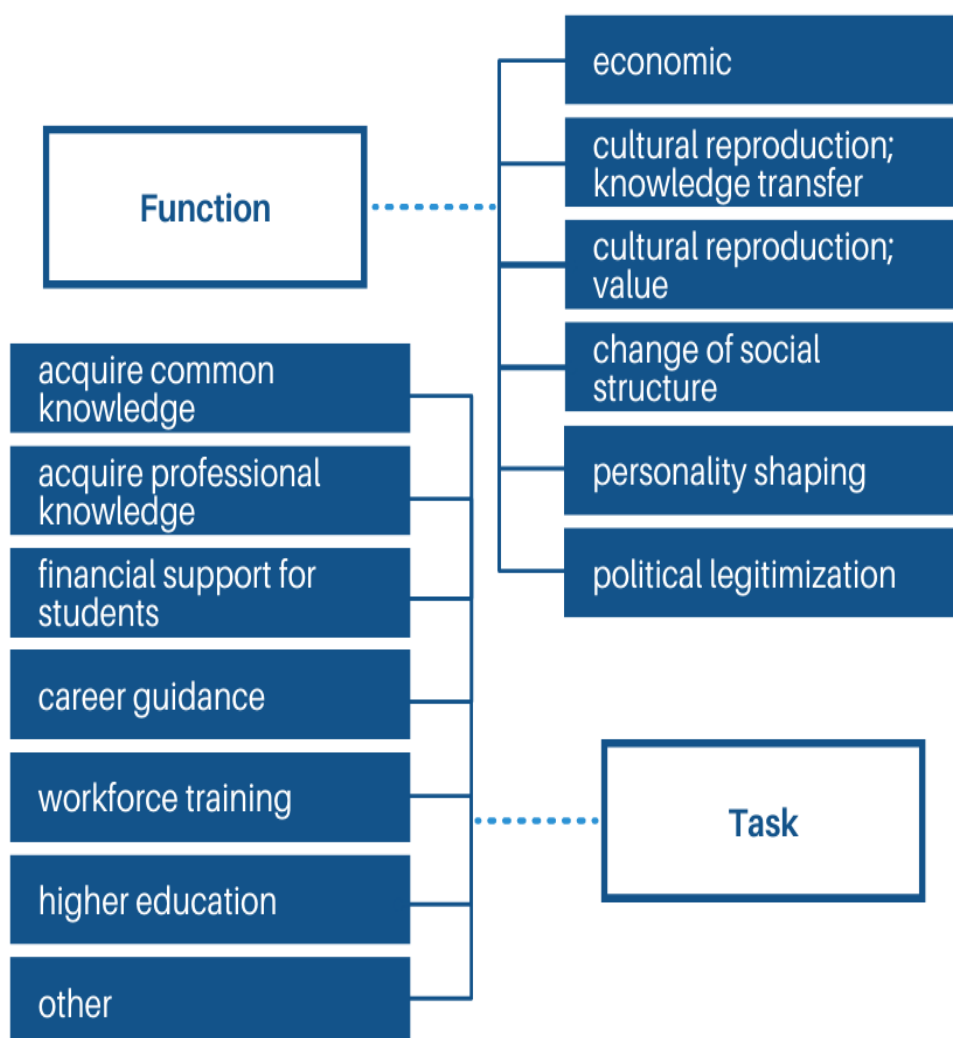


Table 1

The most dominant is the *economic function*, which was coded in 183/29 articles. In this case, *vocational education is linked to the functioning of the economy*. Two major themes emerge in the articles identified by this code: 1) *adaptation to the needs of the economy* and 2) *close collaboration with industry*.

When *adaptation to the needs of the economy* is identified as a goal, expressions are used such as the *need for training to fit in, to adjust to the economy, satisfying its needs*. It also states that vocational education and training must fulfill certain tasks in order to improve the country's economic performance. The most frequently used task is *workforce training*. I have coded here those

articles where the value of the student was measured by its usefulness in the labor market. The task is the right workforce, learning in a real work environment, the sooner the better. The following quote from Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary illustrates the code: “Orbán: the vocational education system must also be reformed. Students should spend more time in practical training than in the classroom” (Index, 2011).

The second major theme in the articles identified by the economic function code is the close collaboration with the industry. The following quote from the President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry shows the control of industry over vocational education.

"The most important thing is that the chambers have been given control of vocational training. From now on, it is the chambers that determine what curriculum should be taught. This curriculum development has taken place, and the number of subjects and courses has been reduced by half. The chambers are involved in the exams." (24.hu, 2011)

Positive self-representational motives can be observed (van Dijk, 2011), in which the president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry highlights his own and the government's decisions as the most important step they have taken for vocational training, which also implies that the situation of training will be different from now on, because the Chamber will have better control over it. Other functions attributed to vocational training also appear in the examined content (for example: *the function of cultural reproduction, transfer of common knowledge*) but to a much lesser extent.

The dominant narratives about VET and the image of its students

My main research question was what kind of narratives dominated the discourse about VET and what kind of image of the vocational education students can be identified. Narratives can be identified by the combination of the presented

codes. The most identified codes lead us to the narratives (Table 2). It's important to look at the image of VET students, what is conveyed by policy makers and the media. The image that society has of VET students determines the way it educates them.

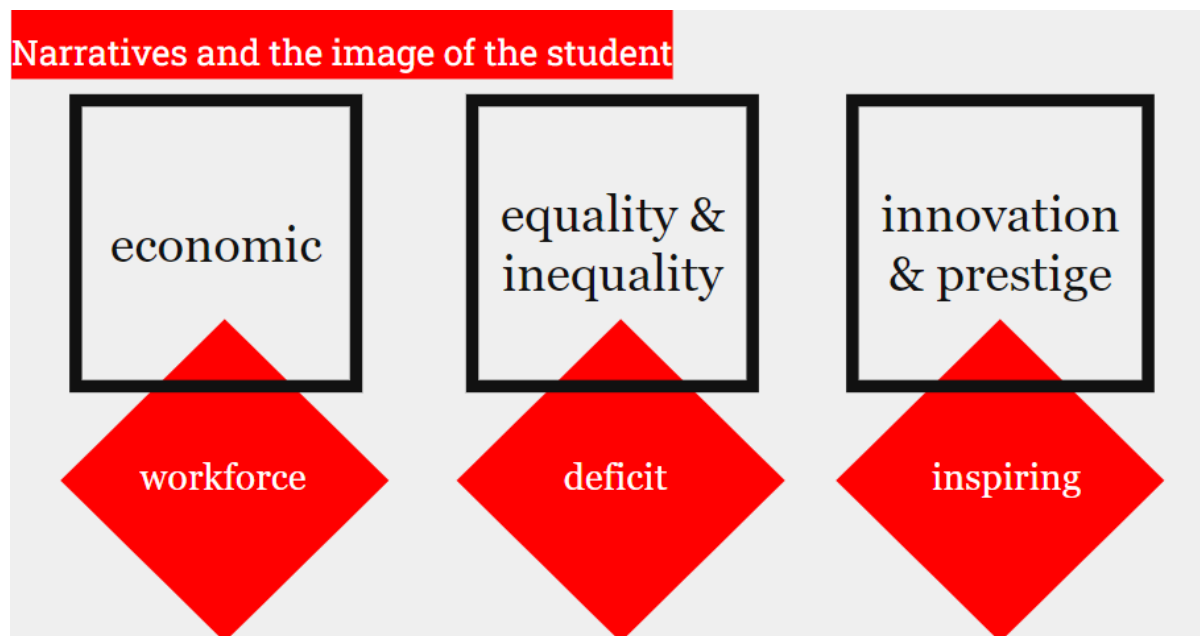


Table 2

Economic narrative and the student as workforce

The most dominant narrative is the *economic* one (183/35). This narrative does not only mean that education is subordinated to the function of the economy, but that every element in the content is given meaning in terms of economic utility. Consequently, not only the education is redefined but also the purpose of society is ordered to function in an economic way. Talking about abstract goals like our nation's success to which everyone must contribute, vocational training by producing the right workforce.

An example from Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in which the economic narrative is often combined with an emotional one.

"The task now is to take measures that can keep the Hungarian economy's development level higher (...) If we cannot do this, the Hungarian economy will start to cough, and we will all have to take out our tissues. That's what we want to avoid (...) This "includes modernizing the Hungarian vocational training system to make more skilled workers available." (Origo, 2011)

The text reflects the ideology of the government and its professed work-based society and its defense of the resource that is important to it, the economy. Rhetorical devices and metaphors are used to persuade. The first is the metaphor of the economy as a malfunctioning machine: if they cannot fulfil their task of keeping the economy growing, the economy will cough. In the Hungarian language, this phrase is used when something, typically a machine, malfunctions or stops working, e.g., the engine of a car starts coughing. The second image is people reaching for handkerchiefs, if the economy breaks down, we'll all be crying, it'll be a problem for everyone. Interesting that it describes the economy as a machine to be run and the main job of government is to run it, which is in everyone's interest. You can infer its ideology, the work-based society and the underlying neoliberal ideology, from the resources that the government considers important.

Another example below, where László Parragh, President of the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry states that the interest of the economy and of Hungarian society is identical.

"It is in the elementary interest of the Hungarian economy and the Hungarian society to carry out the structural reforms, (...) If Hungary really wants to be competitive in this environment, then the organization of the economy, vocational training and trade development must be organized by adopting this culture." (24.hu, 2011)

Part of this narrative is *the image of the student as a workforce*, identified in 183/24 articles. In this narrative, students are an element of the economy, a productive asset. They are also referred to by the following terms and

descriptions in the articles: *young Hungarian professionals; those who need to spend more time in training than in the classroom; those who need to learn in a factory environment; those who are the next generation of professionals, a workforce adapted to the needs of companies; a skilled and trained workforce, a quality workforce; craftsmen, much needed by the economy and to be provided to businesses in the region; human capital resources.*

The best example of this is the vocational training *work contract* between a company and the student, introduced by 2019's law, which is more than an apprenticeship, it creates the legal conditions for them to work during their education from the age of 15.

It is important to underline that the apprenticeship contract or work contract with students in VET is an international practice. Examples from different countries show the kind of cooperation and relations that the market and politics consider desirable between institutions and companies. Dang (2016) examines the vocational education and training systems of six countries - Germany, the UK, South Korea, China and Vietnam - from the perspective of cooperation with industry. In addition to the French school-based system and the German dual-type systems presented earlier, the partnership should be critically examined in terms of what it entitles the firm to and what it gives the school in return. From the point of view of industry influence, South Korea is notable, where the training is offered by the company and the vocational school implements the program by agreement (Dang 2016). It is worth recalling the earlier quotation from the president of the Hungarian Chamber of Industry and Commerce that the most important change in Hungarian training is that the chamber has been given the right to supervise the training and to determine the curriculum. In the South Korean model, it is the responsibility of the vocational school to find the right company and initiate a partnership in return for government and financial support. The training is based on a temporary contract

between the student and the company, with the company guaranteeing a job to the student who completes the training. In return, the student must agree to work for the company for at least two years after the training, with the permission of the parent (Dang 2016). The vocational school is basically reduced to a (wage) labour brokering institution providing training for the company.

Apprenticeship contracts, work contracts for under 18s through educational institutions raise the issue of child labor (Aksoy, 2015). Work through vocational training (in Hungary this is already regulated by the Labor Code, so it is safe to call it work) is not questioned as it is regulated by law. But what do we call it when young people from more difficult circumstances spend their time in jobs (in factories, companies) instead of school? It is worth looking at what students could be doing with the time they give away in exchange for work experience, or more precisely, what is given away by the state. Under duress, there is no choice. This time can be spent on pure learning for those who are not in vocational training, but in high school. Here I am not asserting that only what happens in school counts as learning (we have our criticisms of learning in school, for example from critical pedagogy), nor that practical, experiential learning has no place in school. It is about time as an opportunity and the deprivation of it. Time for learning becomes training - for the capitalist labor market, for wage labor.

Innovation & prestige narrative and the image of an inspiring student

In far fewer articles (183/8) and 2019 content, a new narrative appears, which I identified as innovation & prestige. Far fewer articles around the 2019 law appear to be an interesting narrative which is worth analyzing. This narrative is mostly used by the President of the Chamber of Commerce and the Minister of Innovation and Technology. The narrative of *innovation* is demonstrated by the need for technological progress, and vocational education's role in it. The

narrative of *prestige* shows that going to vocational education is a good choice, because the training develops in the "right direction" and it's attractive to students. "Vocational education is the future!" - this often-uttered slogan illustrates the narrative

Closely, linked to this is the *inspiring image of the student*, which is illustrated in articles about all kinds of vocational competitions where Hungarian students have excelled. The media celebrate as a success when VET performs well for the market (Aksoy, 2015) - or in this case, for the students studying in VET. This narrative presents a picture of a successful and developing economy with strong vocational training and a place worth going for the students. It is worth comparing this 'marketing concept' when the decision makers refer to the same students as 'lacking something'. Basically, they assume that vocational students are lack academic intellectual ability and motivation (Down, B., Smyth, J. and Robinson, 2017).

Narrative of equality and the deficit student image

This narrative includes when people have expressed an opinion on *equality issues* e.g.: there is no such thing as full equality (as the President of The Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry said) or that the change in the vocational law raises equality issues. In relation to the equality dimensions, I included articles here when the students are referred to as disadvantaged and other similar and sometimes dehumanizing terms: *students who are less good learners; who suffer from serious learning disabilities; in short, poor students; who are wayward learners; who are the black sheep of education; who will not be able to fill in a tax bill at work; who do not have the goal of gaining a vast amount of lexical knowledge; who should only learn what is absolutely necessary for their job; a tiler/carpenter should be able to calculate how many tiles are needed to cover a room.*

In the deficit approach's description of students in vocational education and training, the negative representation of the other is represented by the actors interviewed, the essence of the vocational student is captured in the inability to do something. They become the negatively represented other in relation to the other students. It can be observed in the use of negative adjectives and phenomena such as: black sheep, learning disability.

The one critical narrative

There is only one *critical narrative* in the 183 articles. It comes from an opposition politician, who criticizes the economic and workforce narrative, giving a different function to VET: preparing students for life and long-term adaptation, and including all actors subjected to the changes from young people to teachers.

"At the beginning of 2020, the new Vocational Education Act and the new National Basic Curriculum will together set in stone the concepts of segregation, social differences and the policy of the assembly plant. Krisztina Hohn also criticized that there is little time for preparation, and that the new system does not prepare young people for life and long-term adaptation, but only for short-term labor market needs. The politician called for a predictable career progression system for those working in vocational education and training, and for these teachers to be able to work as public servants again." (24.hu, 2019)

Conclusions and alternatives

After the analysis of the 183 articles, it can be said that actors are overrepresented by the government and chamber of commerce. The most dominant narrative is the economic one with its related image of the student as a workforce. Narratives related to equality hardly appeared in the content analyzed, they didn't articulate social mobility as the task of vocational education, and 'education' in a pedagogical dimension was never mentioned.

I would like to highlight some central themes that show the reproduction of capitalism and neoliberalism in the way vocational training and students are defined in the articles.

The first statement: the interest of the economy is the interest of the society

Actors with high influence on VET equalize the interest of the economy and the people. This is based on a false assumption: if the country is richer (economy performs better) its people will be richer, so they live better. It implies that everyone gets their fair share from the wealth production. The falsity of this assumption is confirmed by the literature on social inequalities, if we look only at the current Hungarian example, for the concentration of income in the Hungarian population has remained unchanged over the past 10 years (GKI Gazdaságkutató Zrt, 2021). The growth of the economy benefits some groups and not others. Who benefits is a political decision. When someone, aware of this, nevertheless places an equivalence mark between the interests of the economy and the well-being of people, it is necessary to examine what the purpose of such communication is.

The second statement: the task of vocational education is workforce training and the transfer of labor market skills.

Start with the workforce critique: workforce means students trained to the level considered suitable for work by capital. There are different types of labor needed, if someone is needed only to fill the holes in a shortage sector, that hinders the personal development and fulfilling the talents of the students (Hill, Greaves and Maisuria, 2009). This is strictly related to the deficit theory in vocational education, like VET is presented as some rescue for the ‘bad students’, a possibility for them to be useful (Down, Smyth and Robinson, 2017). Skills labeled useful in the market only pay off if the labor market values these very skills at the very moment. But from time to time the market changes.

This statement did not see the value of education other than its usefulness in the labor market (Klees, 2020).

The historical tradition of separating the types of secondary schools - and its abolition?

So after all, what is the justification for VET? I wanted to highlight Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's critical thoughts about the VET and gymnasium (high school) separation. He states the emergence of the training is problematic because the activities of the students are already determined for the future, based on the economic needs. State gymnasiums are the school of the elites, who don't have the urgent need to prepare themselves for a job as soon as possible, because they don't face financial pressure, therefore they have time to find out their future. The students in the two institutions will occupy different places in the labor market and are therefore set on different educational paths: the vocational school will train workers; the high school will train "managers". Managers in high schools are trained to be international, while workers in vocational education are kept within the national framework so that they do not enter alliances with other workers (Mayo, 2022). And also, the country needs wage labor locally: to recall Orban's quote to the students at the opening of the vocational education year: they will not get a better offer in any other country. Gramsci argued that the separation of high school and vocational education makes school and culture even more of a privilege from which the proletariat is excluded. Thinking back to the research: they don't need lexical knowledge, "*a tiler needs to be able to calculate the area of a room.*" Mayo (2022) outlines the hegemonic perspective that also dominates in education through the problem of migration and focuses on finding the right class alliance. Hegemony can also be captured through the contrast of vocational education in the high school, in comparison to what Gramsci argues above about the exclusion of the working class from culture. On this basis, we can interpret the high school curriculum as

the mainstream, hegemonic material whose curriculum is the subject of public discourse. High school material is called culture, general literacy, while vocational education is called work and training. In this division, the student in high school is the subject and therefore could later be the shaper of culture and literacy, while those in vocational training are excluded from it. Gramsci's proposal is to organize a unified school that provides humanistic and general education, intellectual and practical creative work, and when mature enough, an introduction to social activity (Gramsci, 1979).

Questions to be answered - the need for an anticapitalist agenda in VET and an alternative

In advocating an anti-capitalist critique of education, we must confront ourselves with certain questions about vocational education. We have to respond to our own professional community and to those who hold dominant, pro-market neoliberal narratives about training.

1. What is the position of the anti-capitalist, critical pedagogical community on vocational training? Is there a justification for separating vocational education and training from high school ('gymnasium') education?
2. What are our views on the relationship between school and work? If work is not exploitative, is it considered acceptable? For example, can young people be apprentices in a cooperative workplace based on a solidarity economy model?
3. What do we do with the dilemma that young people in vocational training need a scholarship or a wage because of their social situation? How do we offer young people a meaningful, secure alternative to being premature wage earners? What is this alternative?

The systematic exploitation of disadvantaged, working class young people in vocational training is time stolen from them. When young people could have been developing their thinking, their life goals, their personality - time taken away is compensated with money, pay, jobs. The time of childhood and adolescence, into which capital has entered, commodifies our potential, our human quality.

As an alternative to the system we - teachers, social workers, sociologists - have founded a community space for young people in vocational education in Hungary. Deviszont Community Space is a critical pedagogical program for working class youth in the outskirts of the capital city, Budapest. It offers a local response to the inequalities of the education system and the elitist knowledge production that takes place within them. At Deviszont we use critical pedagogy methodology, which aims to educate people to think critically about society, to be community-minded, to experience their own culture positively and to take active social action. We work to ensure that the young people who come to us are active and aware citizens who value each other's knowledge and are eager to participate in shaping their own communities (Szarka and Tóth, 2021).

What is needed is attention - initiatives, discourse - to vocational training, because capital has long had its eye on it. Answering these questions must be followed by a shared vision, an anti-capitalist agenda for vocational education and training. As others have argued (Aksoy, 2015), vocational education is a class issue.

Notes

1. It should be noted that Hungary is linked to Germany by much more than just a desire to establish the dual system - dependence on the German economy, for example the German automotive industry (Gerőcs and Pinkasz, 2019). The Audi factory in the north-west of the country has an entire school center, from kindergarten to vocational training - the latter being a renowned institution among vocational training centers. Their motto: 'Progress through education' (Audi Hungaria Iskolaközpont Győr, 2022).

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