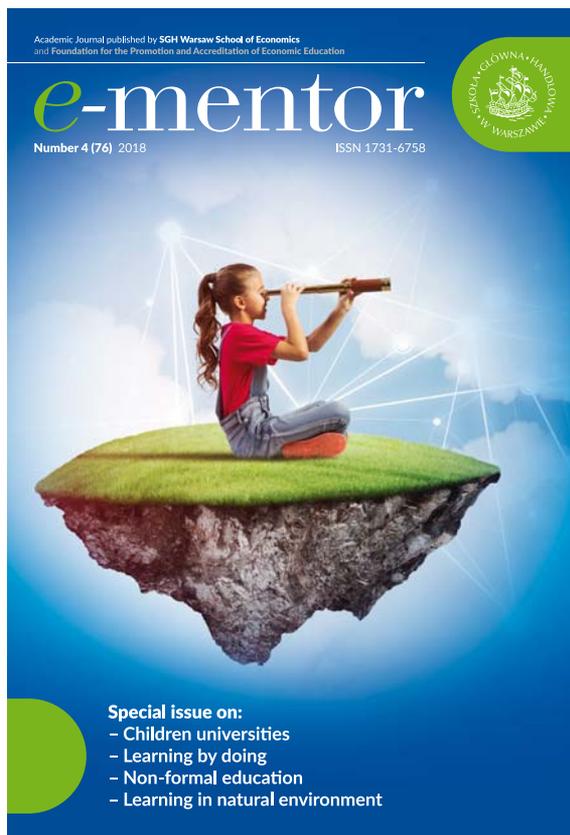


e-mentor

DWUMIESIĘCZNIK SZKOŁY GŁÓWNEJ HANDLOWEJ W WARSZAWIE
WSPÓŁWYDAWCA: FUNDACJA PROMOCJI I AKREDYTACJI KIERUNKÓW EKONOMICZNYCH

2018, nr 4 (76)



Anna Karwińska, *Challenges for socialization in contemporary Poland. The role of children's universities*, „e-mentor” 2018, nr 4(76), s. 19–25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15219/em76.1372>

Challenges for socialization in contemporary Poland. The role of children's universities¹



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For recent 30 years, all institutions in Poland, as well as the Polish society, have to deal with the changes in almost every area of life – from the economy, political system, legal solutions, social life organization, to the culture. Challenges such as the market economy, increasing consumers' expectations and needs, expanding areas of inequity, a spread of the democratic procedures and growing multiculturalism require looking for new solutions, as well as new ways to introduce them. Therefore, it becomes crucial to adjust the processes of upbringing and education in such a way that they respond to the needs generated by the changes in all areas mentioned above. Establishing and supporting an educational initiative could be part of those processes.

Education and upbringing of young children are issues of particular importance with regard to the success of modernization processes. In many countries besides the formal education system, various types of non-formal education aimed at applying the most effective ways of transferring knowledge and skills as well as shaping key competences exist. The children's universities are an example of such institutions. Although, it is only a decade when the first children university appeared, they play a very important educational and social role. A year 2007 is the beginning of children's universities presence in Poland (this is the date of establishing the Children's University Foundation², which was the first institution of that type in Poland). Most often, they are created at and by the universities. In this paper we will try to answer the following questions: Could they play an important role responding to the challenges of modern socialization in Poland? What are their advantages?

Introduction

From the sociological perspective, the observation of changes taking place in the modern world allows noticing the increasing complexity of social life processes and consequently, the new challenges the individuals, as well as the whole social groups, must face. Successive generations participating actively in

various areas of life must also be increasingly active on a global scale. However, keeping to the primary goal of this article the author will concentrate on the issues of preparing young generations to function successfully in the ever-changing world around them.

First of all, the socialization process must correspond to the expectations of individuals. It should allow them to acquire skills, knowledge, and competences indispensable for dealing effectively with all the tasks generated by their participation in various areas of social, economic or political life. On the other hand, the course and effects of the socialization process should also respond to the expectations and needs of the society and the state. It is particularly important when it comes to the maintenance of continuity and social stability as well as the possibility of pursuing a specific policy.

Among the most important tasks for Polish society in the coming years is the development of competences allowing its citizens to deal effectively with different circumstances such as market reality, fierce competition, multicultural communities, and democratic society. It does not simply concern acquisition and updating of knowledge, but first and foremost, development of creativity, gaining various competences and skills, lifelong learning, and building social capital.

The level of knowledge and economic competences of the Polish society

While assessing one's readiness to deal with the challenges, we should first emphasize the importance of an economic dimension of people's existence and activity understood as their participation in the production, acquisition, possession, and consumption. Nowadays, the participation in economic processes is redefined both considering the new (modified) needs and aspirations of individuals along with

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¹ The article was created as a part of the statutory research of the Department of Sociology financed from its own resources by the Cracow University of Economics.

² <https://fundacja.uniwersytetdzieci.pl/en/>

the new community goals and also the changes of systems and hierarchies of the values. That is both about knowledge and understanding that support orientation in the transformations of the economy (perceiving threats, identifying opportunities) as well as about the practical knowledge giving a sense of security in making everyday decisions. That concerns, for instance, expenditure planning, accumulation of savings, management of resources, choosing the proposed benefits or the workplace, and active participation in the market processes. However, as the research results – also those included in this article – indicate a significant part of the Polish society does not have basic knowledge about the economy. People do not understand its mechanisms, cannot observe the processes and how they influence their individual decisions. Economic knowledge mainly comes from popular media. At the same time, over 70% of middle-school and high-school students think that such knowledge is necessary. They would prefer to learn it from teachers and not from parents or media messages (Młodzi Polacy nie mają podstawowej wiedzy z ekonomii, 2012). The results of diagnostic tests carried out in 2014 about knowledge and economic awareness of children and youth in Poland are not very optimistic (Diagnoza wiedzy i świadomości ekonomicznej dzieci i młodzieży w Polsce, 2014, p. 5). As the authors of the study point out, *by translating the Index of Economic Competences (developed as part of research) to the school scale, insufficient level of knowledge (less than half of the points) is presented by as many as 44% of the 6th grade primary school students, 41% of the third-grade middle-school students and 28% of the last but one class of upper-secondary school students. About one-third of the tested students receives a mark C ('satisfactory'), while mark B ('good') is achieved by about a quarter of primary school students, 21% of middle-school students and every third secondary school student. Only a few can manage to achieve an A mark ('perfect' for which 90% of correct answers are necessary) – that concerned only 0.5% of primary school students, 2% of middle-school students and 4% of secondary-school students.* It is worth to mention as well, that tests of the economic knowledge, concerning adults actively participating in social and economic life also indicate the low level of their familiarity with the economic realities. Only 38% of them achieved 'high' scores in the economic test, 44% an 'average' and 18% – 'low' (Stan wiedzy i świadomości ekonomicznej Polaków, 2015, pp. 19 and 40). Sabina Kołodziej, considering the need for economic education of children and youth, recalls the results of research which show that a significant part of the researched group has the stake in the economy – by spending money that they have at their disposal (90% of the respondents aged of 11–18). It does not mean, however, that the youngest participate in economic activities as conscious entities. They do not know much, especially about macroeconomic issues. They use common simplifications and stereotypes rather than well-defined concepts. Also, children and youth do not see the links between different economic

phenomena. Their knowledge of the terms which refer to the economy and are used in everyday practice, for example in a household, is slightly better. However, even the familiarity with these concepts does not necessarily go hand in hand with the ability to apply them (Kołodziej, 2014, pp. 99–100). Moreover, while participating in management processes, people need to adapt to the new economic realities influenced by new technologies, new rules of the organization, as well as the altering values and beliefs. Therefore, the changes in attitudes, behaviors, and aspirations are necessary. They involve, for example, attitudes and features such as entrepreneurship, independence, creativity, innovation or other elements influencing pro-development orientation. Another vital component of this process is the adaptation to taking the risk. That is an integral part of the market economy – the ability that allows surviving against fierce competition, adjusting to various forms of ownership what results also in changing the range of rights and obligations.

On the other hand, the majority (67%) of respondents to the survey mentioned above declare that knowledge of economics, finance, and economy is necessary, while only 29% claim that it is unnecessary. The answers depend on several factors. Some of them are the level of education and the economic knowledge the respondent already had, how it was obtained – through formal or non-formal education, experience in using financial services etc. Information about the pension (34%) and insurance (44%) systems have attracted particular interest among the participants of the diagnosis (Stan wiedzy i świadomości ekonomicznej Polaków, 2015, pp. 39–43).

Behaviors in the field of the economy cannot change rapidly. The results of various reports on opinions, attitudes, aspirations, and actions undertaken by Poles show that those characteristics are relatively constant (Postawy Polaków wobec finansów, 2017; Portret finansowy Polaka, 2016). Therefore, shaping the desired (rational) attitudes and behaviors should start as early as possible. The lack of economic knowledge and competence may result in making wrong financial decisions and decreasing the chances of building a proper basis for family economics and its secure future. Moreover, it weakens the ability to achieve a successful position in the labor market, perceive benefits and avoid losses.

Civic competences and knowledge about socio-political processes among the Polish citizens

The second area of challenges that processes of socialization have to face is the participation of individuals and social groups in a well-functioning community. It is about acquiring appropriate predispositions such as knowledge and skills enabling the individual to undertake social roles, especially the role of a citizen, a member of the community,

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a participant of the important processes and tasks, and a negotiator. The new reality – social, cultural, economic and political – developing throughout the last three decades, makes it necessary for one to adapt, both in an individual and collective dimension, to various new conditions and expectations. Among them one can point to shaping new legal principles, expansion of democracy (including local democracy), creation and operation of many different NGOs, civic movements and other institutions of the so-called third sector, the multiplicity of political parties, openness to the world, extending scope of freedom, increasing respect for property rights. As a result of the changes of the society new challenges emerge. Modern society becomes increasingly polarized, the social distance is growing and also the social mobility increases. It is perceived by modern sociology more like the process of becoming not a stable duration. Simultaneously, this new type of community is included in wider European and world structures (which strengthens 'fluidity' of structures, values, and aspirations). It may also be more open to confronting with: different value systems, other ways of understanding freedom and obligations of members of the society, various ways of organizing and defining responsibility and participation. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that the young generation of Poles, for years, has been more passive than active in social and political life; although, of course, there are some groups of young people involved in initiatives that are important to them. Similar tendencies also appear in Western countries. 'Absence in political life' is conditioned by many factors such as dissatisfaction with the political system, the way politicians act, and the belief that having any impact in political life is impossible. (Szafraniec, 2012, pp. 20–33). Such a situation is a significant challenge for socializing institutions because shaping readiness for active participation in social life seems to be one of the most critical processes of changes in the modern world.

Piotr Sztompka (Sztompka, 2017, pp. 16–18) stressed the importance of possibly universal assimilation at the level of internalization of the values that are crucial to harmonious functioning of social life and determine social integration. Those values are first of all trust, loyalty, reciprocity, solidarity, respect, and justice. They are values that conduce to establishing and maintaining the most important social interactions. Taking advantage of opportunities and utilizing different types of potentials – economic, social, political, and cultural – also depend on them. Shaping those values, promoting their acceptance, as well as introducing them into the system of education are elements that build a civil society. For years, the degree of Poles' readiness for actions aimed at the implementation of the task mentioned above and related to its mental orientations and attitudes

have been the subject of sociological analyses. The famous quotation coming from the letter of Cyprian Kamil Norwid to Michalina née Dziekońska Zalewska (14 November 1862): *We are not the society. We are a great national banner* (Markiewicz, Romanowski, 1990, p. 495) may be a good starting point for these considerations.

One of the most often quoted ideas, considering civil society, is the 'sociological vacuum' described by Stefan Nowak. This 'vacuum' may occur between 'the level of primary groups and the level of the national community' (Nowak, 1979, p. 160), and it could be described as the lack of connections and interactions that go beyond, the more or less, superficial contacts at the mezzo-structure level. For many years, this 'vacuum' has been and still is, both the area of interest of social life researchers and the subject of fears, especially for the third sector representatives, non-governmental organizations, as well as educators operating at various levels of formal and non-formal education.

The existence of a 'sociological vacuum' may create challenges for a well-functioning society. This well-functioning society could be described as a good social environment, in which every individual can satisfy, at an acceptable level, his/her basic and secondary needs, enter into desirable relationships with others, pursue selected lifestyles, participate in social life at the right level, achieve the goals which are important for him/her. It is also worth emphasizing that faced with the previously unknown scale of advanced processes of globalization and universalization, the sense of community is getting important again and people try to restore at least some of its elements. In the contemporary world, increasingly fluid and unstable, the significance of the idea 'we' based on local ties and territorial or religious foundations increases. Under these circumstances, the significance of communicating despite various social divisions grows and becomes a crucial element of establishing unions and reaching an agreement (instead of eliminating different voices) in a conflict situation (Krossa, 2009, p. 260). Increases also, at both a local and a global level of social integration, the ability to cooperate. According to Katarzyna Szara, this is one of the key development resources, the necessary supplementation and extension of the 'three Ts'³ indicated by Richard Florida (Szara, 2015, pp. 184–186).

Developing the values, attitudes and behaviors characteristic to the civil society is essential for proper functioning of the economy and social life processes. In civil society, there are more opportunities of identifying and resolving conflicts on various scales, both local and macro. Its development is also important for the development of culture and its dissemination. The idea of a civil society is present in all reflections regarding democracy and free market economy

³ 'Three Ts' in economy indicated by Richard Florida are: Technology, Talent and Tolerance. The term can have a slightly different meaning in other contexts. (Ed.)

(Korolczuk, 2007; Kapitał społeczny i zaufanie..., 2015; Sasinowski, 2012; Allan, Forrester, Patel, 2008). According to Charles Taylor, this sphere of social action is autonomous, it is based on the relationships between people, that are integrated around the most important values and matters for groups and communities that require a solution (Taylor, 1996, p. 47).

However, the creation and strengthening of the civil society require combination of many factors, among which education for 'being an active citizen' plays a special role. When assessing one's level of civic competences, we should refer to his/her scope of knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and willingness to participate. The results of international ICCS⁴ study from previous years regarding people's civil knowledge and attitudes indicate that although Polish students are generally within the European average, they show the smallest increase in civil knowledge (Wiłkomirska, 2011, p. 59) compared to the previous period covered by similar research (1999–2001). The attitudes of school headmasters and teachers towards the goals of civic education are also interesting. The number of headmasters and teachers of Polish schools who pay attention to the importance of 'promoting the student participation in the life of the local community' and 'promoting the participation in school life' is higher than the European average. Significantly below the European average is the number of headmasters who believe that the purpose of civic education is to 'teach students to defend their beliefs' and 'to maintain the development of effective strategies to combat racism and xenophobia.' Also, below the European average is placed the number of indications that the goal of civil education is 'to develop critical and independent thinking among students' (Kerr et al., 2010, pp. 128–129). It is worth to supplement these observations with the notes of Hanna Świda-Zięba about the disturbing symptoms of 'moral anomaly' occurring in the Polish society. The growing importance of individualism, individual autonomy, freedom of choice, combined with the characteristic understanding of responsibility perceived primarily in the context of own actions *are not conducive to the creation of mechanisms of social moral control, and therefore the violation of ethical standards (also those that are individually recognized) will not be condemned* (Świda-Zięba, 2010, pp. 69–70).

Such targeting at individualism creates a difficult situation for socializing institutions. The issue becomes even more problematic when taking into account the lack of a universally accepted canon of essential values, attitudes, and moral orientations indispensable in the circumstances of increasingly pluralistic, multicultural societies and competitive ethical systems, worldviews, and hierarchies of values. There are dilemmas related to the

perception of the meaning of life, undertaken actions and building a foundation for one's own identity. Janusz Marianski (Marianski, 2014, p. 100) points to the particular trends in the Polish society concerning the importance and sustainability of pro-social values, defining them as transformations from a community (pro-social values) to individualism (egoistic values), from postulated pro-social values to practical individualism. The contemporary world becomes more and more multicultural, economically polarized, divided because of politics or religion. It shrinks, becoming a 'direct environment' for a substantial part of the human population, accessible directly by accelerated growth of spatial mobility and new technologies. There is a question about how this shrinking world affects its perception and comprehension. It is also worth noting that the ability to initiate dialogue and to function in a multicultural, diverse world, simultaneously maintaining the balance between being faithful to important values of one's own culture and the willingness to accept the value of a different culture becomes the fundamental problem.

The challenges for socialization formulated in this article refer to several areas. The first area is the capability to navigate in the complex world of economic relations, including not only a good understanding of micro-, mezzo- and macroeconomic processes, but also developing entrepreneurial attitudes or the ability to choose profession correctly. The second area is the ability to be a citizen in a democratic society. Unfortunately, there is no simple recipe for activating or 'politicizing' citizens and encouraging them to conscious participation in the formation of their social environment. Education, improving the knowledge, understanding the term 'citizen' and shaping a system of pro-social values and attitudes are vital there. The third area regards functioning in a multicultural world by understanding the difference between 'otherness' and 'strangeness', developing the ability to accept diversity and perceiving its opportunities, not threats.

Children's University as an adequate form of children socialization

The role of formal educational institutions in the processes of socialization about the challenges of the modern world is visible. However, those places have significant disadvantages. They may be not flexible enough. They do not guarantee a multidimensional approach to the presented issues, and they not always react quickly enough to the changing needs. In such conditions, the informal institutions have a special mission, which is implementing the principles of lifelong learning and life-wide learning. Piotr Zbie-ranek points to the characteristics that make the

⁴ International Civic and Citizenship Study – the research conducted by The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. The data quoted in the paper come from the study carried out in 2009, Poland did not participate in the second edition of the study in 2016. The next one is planned for 2022.

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out-of-school education stand out. This sector of education develops in line with identified challenges and needs of the social environment. It is open to cover new topics and add issues that are not included in the formal education program. It also applies different means of motivating for participation and its unique 'teaching philosophy.' This philosophy allows for more flexible methods of knowledge transfer, interdisciplinarity and for the elimination of rigid divisions between 'a teacher' and 'a student' (Zbieranek, 2011, pp. 9–13).

One of such institutions that may respond adequately to the need of providing children with knowledge and competences required for conscious and active participation in economic, social, cultural and political processes is a children's university. It worth noting, that stimulating curiosity and willingness to ask questions are the main priorities in the educational process implemented by the children's universities. The questions asked by children became the inspiration for the creation of the first Kinder-Uni in Tübingen in 2002. The first lecture gathered 400 young students who could then get the answer to the question 'Why do volcanoes erupt?'. For the second lecture, the largest university auditorium was chosen, but even then, 1000 children could hardly fit in the room for 700 people. During other lectures children could find answers to other important issues such as 'Why is human cloning banned?', 'Why are some people rich and others poor?' or 'Why do people die?'. Children were fascinated with their student status not only because of the possibility of getting answers to their questions. They were also happy with the right to follow the real academic customs. Even the youngest students have the right to start their classes with 'academic grace period.' They could express their applause by tapping of fists on the tables. They have real student IDs and the privilege to eat in the university canteen⁵. All these circumstances created the situation of so-called positive distinction, which attracted other young students.

The model of one-way transfer of knowledge still dominates in many schools. The child takes the role of 'a learner,' which is not very attractive to contemporary young people. It is much more interesting to solve problems or to develop one's interests and passions. Asking questions is quite often difficult and may result in a so-called 'silent audience.' A lecturer cannot be sure then if the students listen to the lecture or not. Children are usually 'not aware' of this difficulty, which means they have no fear of participating actively in the class and asking questions, they do not anticipate it as showing their ignorance. Even if it is not always easy to find a satisfactory answer to all the questions but prompting students to search for explanations becomes an exciting challenge, both for lecturers and children. According to the research on

the effects of taking part in the classes of children's universities in Great Britain (Children's University..., 2017, pp. 41–45), this kind of educational institutions not only offers attractive activities for children but also enables developing crucial competences. It refers both to the skills included in school programs and to those concerned being less critical and not included in formal education. According to that research, children participating in the activities of the children's university developed their mathematical skills and learned to read much more quickly. As for the other abilities, the most important are competences required for teamwork, the capacity to understand the others (empathy) and a higher level of communication. Building self-confidence and the interest in one's future as well as spotting that learning new things may be 'enjoyable task' are equally important.

The children's university mission is to create an educational environment stimulating creativity and to develop intellectual and social capital. James J. Heckman (Heckman, 2011, p. 31), the Nobel Prize winner in economics in 2000, repeatedly emphasized the importance of investing in the child's development from an early age. In 2011 he wrote that those who would like to reduce deficits and strengthen the economy should invest in the education of the youngest. Each year when children (especially from dysfunctional families) are left without support for their development and education, their chances of reducing future inequities diminishes significantly. That is a forward-looking strategy that allows avoiding economic and social costs in the few decades.

For many years, the European Commission has been undertaking initiatives related to acquiring key competences, including civil competences which play an essential role in society. European institutions pay particular attention to activities that encourage young people to participate in social and civil life. They allow them to create a strategy for 'social unity and equity' (Edukacja obywatelska w Europie, 2012, p. 7). Authors of the report emphasize the necessity of going beyond the school's microcosm and using other than school sources of knowledge and competences (Edukacja obywatelska w Europie, 2012, pp. 61 and n.).

Children's universities created by the higher education institutions are particularly well suited to perform these tasks. First of all, they can involve in the teaching process the academic staff including lecturers and researchers, as well as the universities' infrastructure (e.g., scientific labs). Furthermore, they are not constrained by the core curriculum and school evaluations, and thanks to that they have almost endless possibilities for creating more flexible teaching, tailored to children's needs. They can also engage students in preparation of the teaching programs and methods, which encourages a more creative and innovative approach to teaching and learning.

⁵ Based on the materials by courtesy of Michael Seifert – Public Relations Manager at the University of Tübingen

Conclusions

The importance of education has been emphasized in the 'Europe 2020' development strategy. Therefore, investment in education should be one of the key priorities in realizing the vision of the future world, which could fulfill social aspirations and expectations. The main goal of the European 'Youth in Action' Programme, implemented several years ago, was to enable young people to improve their competences in various areas, both social and economic. Among those competences, innovativeness, creativity, and design thinking played a significant role. That program offered multiple training events provided by non-formal educational institutions, outside the national education system (Wochowska, 2014, pp. 17–18). It is worth to be stressed that applying non-institutional forms of education allows for more freedom in creating educational programs and using innovative teaching methods aimed at individualized and non-standard models of learning.

Robert Firmhofer, the director of the Copernicus Science Center, evaluating school as an educational institution, has pointed to problems with adjusting the educational projects to social expectations and contemporary challenges. *There is a huge gap between knowledge and skills obtained by pupils at school and those they really need to achieve success in their future personal or professional life. To some extent, this situation is the result of the character of the school, which is a conservative institution by its nature* (Firmhofer, 2012, p. 11).

Looking for new models of education, OECD formulates various concepts and visions. The following approaches are proposed:

- to maintain the current school model with some necessary modifications, in other words – the status quo;
- to transform a current school model into a social education center that could respond to the changing social needs, especially in the area of a civil society development and strengthening of democratic values – re-schooling;
- to abandon the only one school model (or even the idea of a school as an educational institution) and utilize instead the possibilities of the network society what in turn should lead to diversification of educational offers and new ways of knowledge delivery – de-schooling (Kołodziejczyk, Polak, 2011, pp. 20–24).

In the ongoing discussions on the best, most effective future model of education, the institutions that implement concepts of life-long-learning and life-wide-learning may (and should) play a significant role. As it was mentioned above, thanks to their unique features and their potential, the children's universities may provide a complementary and more flexible educational offer.

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Abstract

For three decades, Polish society has been confronted with new expectations and challenges related to the transformation of virtually all areas of life. It has to deal with many problems, as well as with the necessity to acquire new competences, skills, and knowledge in various fields. In this article, the author has identified several key challenges. They refer especially to obtaining capabilities needed for active participation in the market economy and civil society. Social values enabling integration are of key importance among them. According to research cited in the paper, Polish society has insufficient knowledge and competences in these fields. Simultaneously, they are very desirable in the process of modernization of Poland's economy.

Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that the socialization processes, both formal and non-formal, are adequate to the needs and expectations of the society. It is difficult to overestimate the value of the opportunity to explore freely, to ask questions, and to be allowed to find a solution to a given problem because such experiences support the development of key competences indispensable for proper functioning in the modern, dynamically changing world. In this article, the author points out a vital role of non-formal institutions, particularly the children's universities, which are more flexible and may have an impact on creating the concept of the future more personalized education.

Key words: civil society; integration values; economic competences; civil competences; socialization processes; the children's university

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