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ENVIRONMENTAL DIVERSIFICATION OF CAREER PLANS
AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS –
CIRCUMSTANCES AND CONSEQUENCES

ERRATA

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ENVIRONMENTAL DIVERSIFICATION OF CAREER PLANS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS – CIRCUMSTANCES AND CONSEQUENCES

ABSTRACT

The article attempts at defining the circumstances and consequences of environmental diversification in rural education, career plans and aspirations of young people in rural areas in the context of developmental perspectives in the countryside.

The Polish countryside is characterized by strong diversification in demographic, social and economic terms. The central and eastern regions have a tendency for depopulation (a relatively high percentage of people in post-working age, negative balance of internal migrations), they are largely agricultural (most of the population employed in the agricultural sector, scarcity of non-agricultural employment), while the incomes of local government authorities and human capital are at a low level. On the other hand, it is in Central and Eastern Poland that a larger percentage of young people continue their education at tertiary level and the results of pupils in elementary schools and junior high schools appear to be better, regardless of the unfavourable environmental circumstances.

Key words: rural area, rural education, Poland.

JEL classification: Q01, R11.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the theory of sociology there are two theoretical perspectives that explain the role of education in modern societies – the functionalist and the conflict perspectives. In the light of the functionalist perspective, the role of education is above all to ensure stability and sustenance to the social system. With the change in the social system (in the sphere of economy above all), the system of education alters in order to provide individuals with particular professional skills and qualifications that will enable them to discharge their professional duties. The possibility of changing the position of an individual (or social groups) in the stratification system is determined only by meritocratic criteria (Davis, Moore 2005, Parsons 1969).

The conflict paradigm, by its very definition, focuses on conflicts within societies. Within its framework, the system of education is viewed as a tool which reproduces the divisions that exist in the society (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1990). By reproducing the elements of dominant culture in the teaching methods and the content, it sustains the existing social inequalities (Nieżgoda 1993).

In relation to the Polish rural areas, the system of education performed both these functions all at once. By the mid 20th century, 2/3 of the population were country dwellers. In the time of fast industrialization and urbanization of the country, the education system became a channel of mass social advancement for the country dwellers who migrated to towns and found employment in industry. However, the quality of education in rural areas was so low that it led to their social and cultural marginalization. Since the 1980s, the migrations to towns have stopped, but the educational career patterns have remained unchanged. The rural young people, who received lower quality education, were characterized by shorter educational careers that culminated in a basic vocational school. University education was reserved for a relatively small group of young rural people who were most talented and most determined (Kwieciński 1995).

After 1990, Poland has experienced an educational revolution. The transition from the state-controlled economy to the market economy has made education be a marker of the social status. As a consequence, the educational aspirations of both younger and older generations have considerably increased. Simultaneously, due to the dissemination of high school and college education, a university degree has become available for the rural youth, which has never been noticed before.

The shift in the area of educational aspirations of the Polish public (including the rural population) and the transformations taking place in the education system were accompanied by growing pressure exerted on schools by students' parents, who expected high educational performance. As a result, an increase in the level of education in rural schools could be noticed. However, compared to the educational outcomes in urban schools, the performance of rural schools has different consequences for the environment they operate.

Our main objective is an attempt to determine the role that rural schools play in the development of the environment in which they exist, as well as the importance of local economic factors together with demographic and social problems in defining this role.

2. SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FUNCTIONING OF RURAL SCHOOLS

One of the most fundamental factors that determine different educational choices in the town and in the countryside has been the cultural capital of the family, which is defined by the parents' level of education. In the early 1990s, one in fifty country dwellers had graduated a higher education institution, i.e. 1.9%. By the year 2002, the percentage of degree holders had risen to 4.2%, yet the disparity by comparison with the town dwellers, 13% of which were higher education graduates, still remained significant.

By the year 2011, the gap between the town and the countryside in terms of education had narrowed (see Table 1). The share of the population with higher

education qualifications was only twice as big in towns. However, a third of the population in the countryside had elementary education compared to a fifth of the population with the same education in towns.

In the period 1988–2011, the countryside compensated for its underdevelopment and the gap between the rural and urban areas in terms of education narrowed. While in the early 1990s, the percentage of those with higher education qualifications was 5 times as high in urban areas compared to those in the countryside, by 2002 the difference fell to only 3 times. This difference diminished even further in the first decade of the 21st century, which was a direct consequence of the educational boom at the turn of centuries.

Table 1

Population by educational attainment and place of residence in the years 1988, 2002 and 2011 (%)

Educational attainment	1988		2002		2011	
	urban areas	rural areas	urban areas	rural areas	urban areas	rural areas
Higher education	8.5	1.9	12.8	4.1	21.4	9.8
Secondary and post-secondary	30.6	14.9	38.4	24.2	35.4	25.3
Basic vocational education	23.4	26.2	21.7	30.4	18.4	26.4
Elementary education	33.5	45.2	23.8	35.8	18.3	32.5
Incomplete elementary education or no schooling	4.0	11.8	3.3	5.5	6.5	6.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: National Census 1988, 2002 and 2011.

The noticeable changes in the structure of education of the Polish society would not have been possible without a sudden rise in the educational aspirations. In the year 1993, 64% of parents wanted their daughters to attend higher education (in relation to sons the figure was 65%), but by mid 1990s the figure had risen to 73%, only to exceed 80% by 2009 (86% for daughters and 84% for sons). However, the differences by residence areas between the parents' aspirations for their children have become clearly distinguishable. In the early years after the system transformation (1993), 55% of parents in the countryside wanted higher education for their daughters compared to 72% of those from the town. In relation to sons, the figures were 56% and 75% respectively (CBOS 2009).

In the next years, a much greater dynamics in the rise of educational aspirations in the countryside could be noticed. As a consequence, the differences between the parents in the town and in the countryside have been reduced. By the year 2009, 84% of parents in the countryside and 91% of parents from cities expected their daughters to attend higher education (the figures for sons are comparable). Therefore, the difference of 17% in the early 1990s was reduced to 7% by late 2000s (CBOS 2009).

The increase of the educational aspirations is closely related to the change of the role that education played in the 1990s. The dynamic changes on the labour market needed highly qualified workers with high education, determining the

university diploma to be identified with a certain guarantee of success. The results of the Polish General Social Survey reveals that in the year 1992 less than 14% of the rural people were convinced that higher education is a decisive factor for becoming successful. 10 years later the figure rose to 34%, with 54% claiming that education was essential. A similar change was noticed in the general public opinion throughout the country in the period 1992-2008 (PGSS 1992-2008).

It is obvious that the change in the public educational aspirations would not have been possible if it had not been for the change of the educational system itself, which has increased the young people's access to education (in the rural areas as well). By mid 1980s, the percentage of basic vocational school pupils in rural areas rose to 58.9%, whereas in towns the figure was 29.3% (Kwieciński 1995). By the year preceding the introduction of school reform (1998)¹, the figures had fallen to 36.9% and 25.6% respectively (Kwieciński 2002). Therefore, the differences in educational careers by residence areas were reduced over the transformation period. High schools and vocational high schools became accessible for the rural youth. The process intensified even further at the turn of the century. In 2003, half of the rural youth and 61% of their counterparts in town continued their education in high schools, whose main purpose is to prepare students for university education.

The noticeable decreasing tendency of pupils from both towns and countryside to continue their education in basic vocational schools and the rising tendency of those continuing their education in high schools stopped in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, the accessibility of high schools and vocational high schools has become unprecedented. For the first time in the Polish history, the rural youth, in spite of worse elementary schooling, had the opportunity to continue their education in schools that gave them the possibility to study at a university.

This would not have been possible without the changes in secondary schooling whose main feature was a decrease in number of the basic vocational school students and the corresponding increase in the number of high school students (Table 2).

The aforementioned changes in the structure of secondary schooling, which have continued since early 1990s, were produced due to the rising aspirations of the younger generation (also originating from rural areas), whose growing majority became interested in continuing their education in schools that gave them the possibility to continue their studies in universities. As mentioned before, this alteration was made possible by increasing the accessibility of high schools and

¹ Until 1998, the education system consisted of eight years of primary school, three-year basic vocational school, a five-year vocational high school and a four-year high school. As part of the 1999 education reform primary education was shortened to 6 years of age (children age from 6 to 12 years) and it was introduced three years of gymnasium. Duration of education in vocational high school, high school and basic vocational school has been reduced by one year. The students of vocational high school as a high school join the optional national test, which entitles them to continue their education at universities. Basic vocational school students can not continue education in colleges and universities. Graduates of these schools can continue their education in complementary high school and vocational school and then, after passing the national test, they can study at the university.

vocational schools. Simultaneously, the accessibility of universities also increased. In the year 1990, 12.5% of young people aged 19-24 continued their education at universities. In the early 2000s, the figure grew to 50%.

Table 2
Place of residence and type of secondary school – dynamics of changes

Type of secondary school	Place of residence					
	1998		2003		2009	
	rural areas	urban areas	rural areas	urban areas	rural areas	urban areas
Basic vocational school	36.9	25.6	15.3	9.5	13.0	8.8
Vocational high school	34.5	20.7	35.2	26.9	38.9	30.3
High school	28.5	53.7	49.5	63.6	48.1	60.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Kwieciński 1995, 2002, Domalewski, Mikiewicz 2004, Domalewski 2012.

However, the growing interest in secondary and tertiary education was brought to a halt by mid 2000s, which was reflected in the changes in secondary schooling structure and the decrease in the number of colleges. The inflow of pupils to secondary schooling has been stable ever since, with the number of basic vocational school candidates growing. The revival of basic vocational schools was triggered by two factors. Firstly, the labour market became replete with college graduates. As few as five years back, a college diploma would have been an asset that would allow a candidate to find attractive employment. At this point, however, the college diploma has been considerably devalued, resulting in massive employment difficulties for the graduates (economists, lawyers, humanities graduates) who could not find jobs according to their education. The situation was aggravated by a hiatus in the economic development in Poland at the dawn of the new century.

Secondly, Poland's accession to the EU played its part in the decreasing number of college students. The young people were convinced that the new labour markets that were opened by other European countries would favour workers with basic vocational school skills rather than college graduates.

The dissemination of secondary and tertiary schooling contributed to the inflation of college degrees. Higher education ceased to be a factor enabling to attain a position in the social structure. Admittedly, college graduates relatively seldom experience unemployment, but the new EU labour markets have brought the demand for manual working skills and services. At the same time, the changes in the educational system that took place in the 1990s marginalized vocational training. Young people appear to be keen observers of the surrounding reality, the labour market in particular. The new labour opportunities were reflected in the change of educational aspirations and also in the structure of secondary schooling.

Although the cooling down of educational aspirations is a characteristic both in the rural and urban areas, for the young generation, the place of residence still remains the differentiating factor in planning their educational career. In the year 2003, higher education at Master's degree level was planned by 56.7% of young

rural people and 66% of the urban youth. Six years later, the figures dropped to 48.3% and 58.9% respectively. The rural young people are more eager to end their education at a secondary or basic vocational level.

Table 3
Place of residence and the young people's educational aspirations

Educational aspirations	Place of residence			
	2003		2009	
	In the countryside	In the city	In the countryside	In the city
Basic vocational	1.1	0.7	3.7	1.8
Secondary	29.1	21.2	28.4	23.9
Bachelor's degree	13.1	12.1	19.5	15.5
Master's degree	39.9	45.8	31.2	35.8
Post-graduate	16.8	20.2	17.1	23.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Domalewski, Mikiewicz 2004, Domalewski 2012.

At this point, it is legitimate to ask whether the young people's decreasing aspirations are a direct consequence of their parents lower level of education (cultural capital of the family). Yet it appears that the young people with similar family background, but residing in the rural areas, declare lower educational aspirations than their urban peers.

The very fact of living in the countryside not only determines lower educational aspirations, but also the choice of educational path in terms of secondary and tertiary education. The rural youth, despite having similar competences and originating from similar family backgrounds, most often continue their education in lower quality schools, both at the secondary and tertiary level.

The dissemination of education at the secondary and tertiary level contributes to the increase in their educational opportunities on one hand. On the other hand, however equal the opportunities, the quality of the education received by countryside people lowers their chances to compete on the labour market.

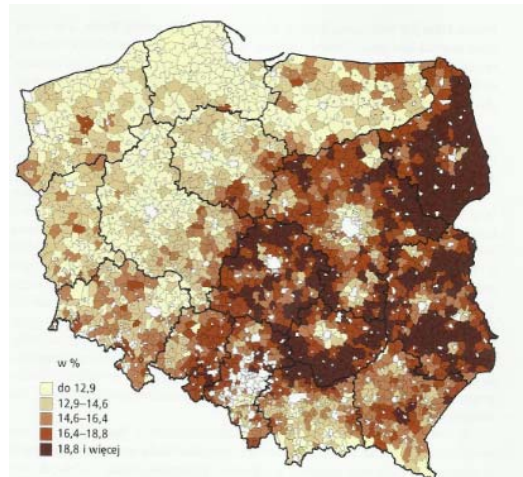
Having decided to attend secondary level education, the young rural people opt for lower quality schools. A similar regularity is observable at the tertiary level – the rural youth are more likely to study at lower quality colleges, which had been disregarded by their urban peers (Wasielowski 2013).

3. DIVERSE ECONOMIC, DEMOGRAPHIC, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS DETERMINING THE FUNCTIONING OF RURAL SCHOOLS

In terms of a number of characteristics, the Polish countryside is internally diverse. The existing variations in the economic, demographic and social circumstances are largely historically conditioned. This internal differentiation of

the Polish countryside makes the rural schools operate in non-uniform conditions. However, as previously noted, the level of functioning of rural schools has always been a function of the local environment. The academic performance of rural school students, as well as their plans, educational aspirations, and educational careers were conditioned by local development factors of the school environment. This situation has practically remained unchanged since the end of last century.

Figure 1 shows the demographic diversity of the rural population in relation to the population of working age. A clear distinction exists between the Central and Eastern parts of the Polish countryside, where the rural population is relatively old, and the Western and Northern parts. The demographic discrepancies in Poland are concurrent with the diversity of rural functions. The Central and Eastern part of the country largely consists of agricultural areas, with relatively small farms and an underdeveloped non-agricultural labour market (Rosner, Stanny 2007).



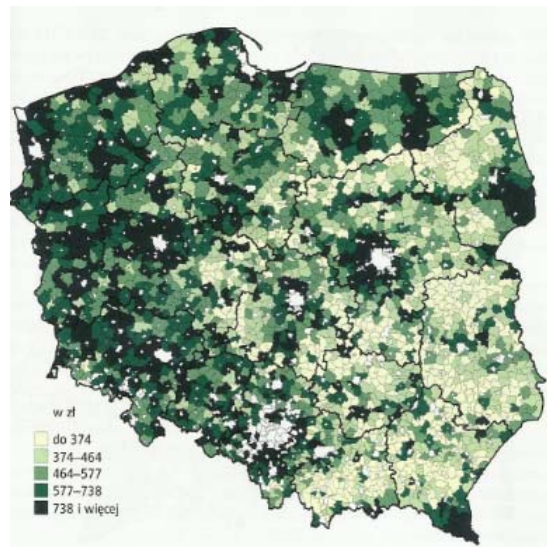
Source: Rosner, Andrzej, Stanny, Monika, 2007.

Figure 1. Participation in the population of post-working age population.

There are two types of consequences of the aforementioned diversity of rural areas for the functioning of schools. Firstly, the rural character of Central and Eastern Poland means that the inhabitants of these regions have a relatively low cultural capital. The challenges facing rural schools in such an environment are therefore incomparably more difficult than those with which the schools operating in Western and Northern Poland have to cope. Secondly, a relatively higher percentage of elderly people in the population of Central and Eastern Poland means that there are fewer children of school age, and consequently, the schools in these regions are smaller (in terms of number of students) and more expensive to maintain.

The responsibility for financing and managing public schools in Poland lies with the local government authorities. The municipal government receives funding for education from the state budget. At the same time, it is obliged to provide free

education for children and adolescents subject to compulsory education. The problem is that the funds that the municipal government receives from the state budget allows for financing the ongoing expenses (mostly salaries of teachers and school staff) only. This means that the municipal government is confronted with the need to finance education on its own. However, local governments with high revenues are able to fulfil this obligation. These revenues are largely conditioned by the nature of the municipality – local governments in the Western and Northern Poland have higher incomes at their disposal. These are areas with a relatively higher percentage of the population earning their living from non-agricultural income sources and more companies operate outside agriculture (Stanny).



Source: Rosner, Andrzej, Stanny, Monika, 2007.

Figure 2. Municipal budget own revenues per 1 inhabitant (in PLN).

When the differences in income levels of local governments (per capita) are investigated, they prove to be consistent with demographic structures – local governments in Western and Northern Poland have access to relatively higher budgets. Those rural areas which are largely agricultural in character, with predominance of a relatively older population, and characterised by insignificance of non-agricultural economic activities, comprise that part of Polish rural areas where governments' revenues are relatively smaller, which consequently limits the possibilities of financing education.

This means that an accumulation of negative environmental factors, determining the functioning of schools, can be noticed in the rural areas of Poland. A small number of children and adolescents of school age in the population is reflected in the size of schools, which are relatively smaller in Central and Eastern Poland, and

therefore more expensive to maintain. Meanwhile, school funding opportunities are very limited for local governments due to their relatively lower incomes (because of a small proportion of their own resources in the budget). Simultaneously, the amount of cultural capital of school students in these environments is relatively small, which represents an additional challenge for the educational institutions operating in Central and Eastern Poland.

4. THE DIVERSITY OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF RURAL SCHOOLS

Since the introduction of universal education in rural areas, its performance level (measured by the educational competence of students, their educational plans and careers) was determined by their local environmental conditions. The existing analyses indicate that several rural areas in Poland are dealing with an accumulation of demographic, social, and economic conditions that negatively affect the functioning of rural schools. It therefore appears that the areas affected by negative environmental conditions achieve poorer results, which is justified. Meanwhile, the results of standardized external examinations (national tests), introduced in 2002, at the end of primary and secondary schools, indicate different regularities from those observed in the past². Better results on national tests are achieved in schools operating in environments characterized by relatively unfavourable conditions (operating in the agricultural environment, with unfavourable demographic structure, in municipalities where education funding opportunities from their own budgets are largely limited).

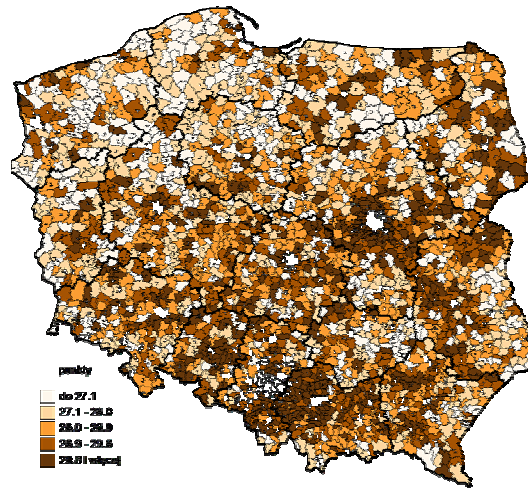
Figure 3 presents the performance of students in the exam carried out at the end of primary school. An analysis of the spatial diversity of student performance allows certain regularities to be observed. Firstly, students attending schools in suburban municipalities achieve higher scores. Moreover, as already mentioned before, students achieve higher educational goals in schools operating in environments with unfavourable conditions – in depopulated areas and agricultural regions characterized by underdeveloped non-agricultural labour market and relatively poorer in terms of the wealth of local municipalities.

Paradoxically, it appears that the schools operating in unfavourable environments achieve higher educational goals than institutions (mostly suburban) operating in environments characterized by a favourable demographic structure, developed non-agricultural labour market, and high revenues of local governments enabling schools to be funded through their own funds.

The variation patterns in the scores on national tests are observable across the country. They are also reflected in the findings of the research study carried out in

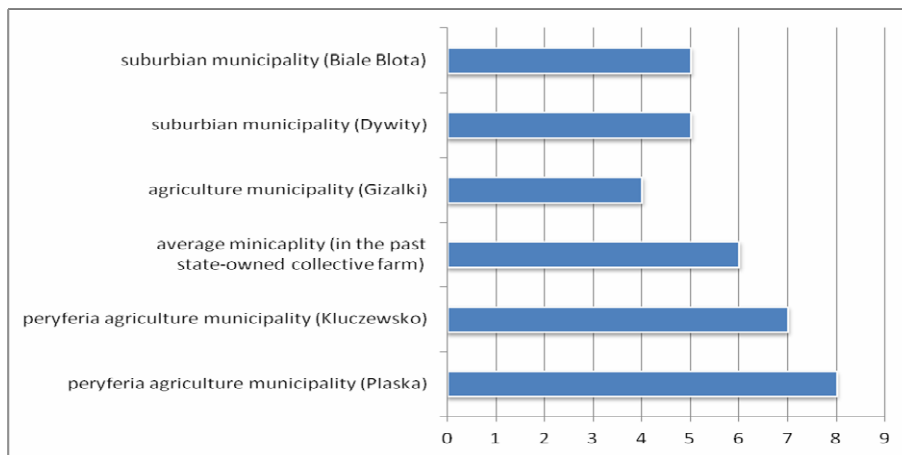
² Since 2002, Poland has had a system of an external assessment of students and schools. Every year students of the last grade of primary schools and lower secondary schools take a national test (tests are uniform across the country and standardized).

six municipalities deliberately chosen due to their various characteristics in terms of social, demographic and economic development. Studies were first conducted in these residence areas in 2002. Subsequent studies took place in 2008 and 2011. Figure 4 shows the national test scores (the humanities) of lower secondary schools located in municipal towns, expressed on a nationwide stanine scale.



Source: on the basis data of CKE, 2006.

Figure 3. Student scores on the national test after primary school.



Source: on the basis data CKE 2011 r.

Figure 4. National gymnasium test scores (the humanities) on a stanine scale (2011).

The lower secondary school with the highest scores operates in an area with the least favourable environmental conditions – in an agricultural municipality

characterized by a low level of enterprise development, poverty of the non-agricultural labour market, unfavourable demographic situation (strong depopulation process), and spatial conditions (this municipality is one of the ten largest municipalities in Poland which is reflected in the distance from the family home to school). The lowest results were achieved by a school operating in a municipality characterized by average characteristics and development (Wielkopolskie Voivodeship) with an agricultural character. However, the lower secondary schools that came next operate in suburban municipalities (Bydgoszcz and Olsztyn) in which student scores in the lower secondary school exams are relatively low.

These environments are different due to the social characteristics of their inhabitants. Of course, in suburban municipalities, the social composition of students is relatively more favourable than in their peripheral agricultural counterparts (Płaska, Kluczewsko). Nevertheless, the achievements of schools operating in unfavourable environments appear to be relatively higher than those of schools in suburban communities, characterized by a higher level of cultural capital of their students (reflected in the level of education of their parents), and proximity to large urban centres (with a developed labour market, with an extensive educational offer for secondary and higher education).

Table 4

The location of junior high schools and the educational aspirations of their students

Educational aspirations	The location of junior high schools					
	Białe Błota	Dywity	Gizałki	Otyń	Kluczewsko	Płaska
Vocational education	2.9	3.7				
Secondary education	29.4	22.2	41.0	13.8	25.0	22.6
Higher education	67.6	74.1	59.0	86.2	75.0	77.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

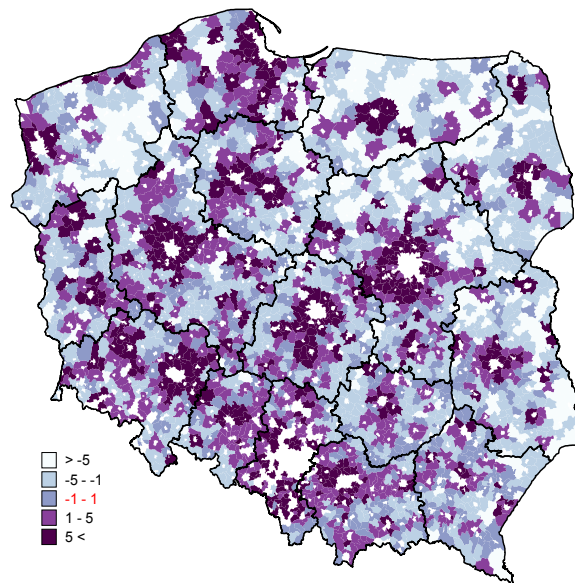
Source: own research, 2011.

Furthermore, an analysis of educational aspirations of students reveals that they are the highest in the post-state farm municipality (Otyń) and peripheral agricultural municipalities (Płaska, Kluczewsko). The least ambitious educational expectations are seen in students from an average agricultural municipality (Gizałki), which may be due to the relatively low performance of junior high school students of this municipality in external examinations, similarly to the students in a suburban municipality (Białe Błota). Thus, the students attending middle schools in unfavourable developmental environments are characterized by high educational aspirations, which, most importantly, are reflected in their educational performance. This means that traditional patterns of environmental inequalities in access to education have been reduced.

Clarifying these patterns of higher educational attainment and more ambitious educational plans for the students of schools operating in agricultural environments far away from urban labour markets and education centres, which is a surprising

fact if we regard the environmental conditions, requires considering the broader social context (Domalewski 2006). Better school results on national test and more ambitious aspirations of the younger generation in rural areas can be attributed to the determination of parents, schools (principals and teachers), and local education authorities (municipal authorities). This determination is a result of the perception of education as the only capital the youth can be equipped with. This capital will allow rural youth to leave their family environment in order to take on new challenges in the future (in cities or rural areas that allow for more opportunities, and are also more challenging). The same mechanism most likely accounts for the situation on former state farms which, due to the poverty of the local labour market, have little to offer to the young people. Education becomes the sole factor that allows young people to leave the family environment and migrate to areas with more enticing opportunities.

Spatial diversification of internal migration serves as a validation for this thesis, which points to a perception of rural education as one of, or even the only capital that family or school can equip young people with. Figure 5 shows the net internal migration (rural-urban) ratio.



Source: M. Stanny 2013.

Figure 5. Net internal migration (rural-urban) ratio in parts per thousand in 2006-2008.

Two regularities can be noticed in the process of internal mobility of people from rural areas in Poland. Firstly, the impact of large cities is felt through the growth of population in suburban areas. This trend has been noticed since the 1990s. Secondly, north-east and eastern Poland are characterized by the migration

of rural population to other regions. Taking into account the age structure of the inhabitants of these areas and the low natural increase rate, it is legitimate to argue that migration mostly concerns young people.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The role played by school in the development process in rural areas remains unequivocal. On one hand, education in rural areas has a functional value that is manifested in the school's ability to reduce the unfavourable social and environmental influences. Young people from relatively poorer agricultural areas who attend smaller schools located away from the students' dwellings, who are characterised by low cultural values that originate in the family socialization, are equipped with a set of skills and abilities in the course of their education that do not match the accumulation of negative environmental conditions. Paradoxically, the educational competence of young people from these rural areas is comparable with the competence of their peers from suburban areas. However, on the other hand, the human capital that is provided by school does not constitute a rural resource that might potentially contribute to its development. A high degree of abilities and skills among the students of schools from agricultural, depopulated areas that are characterized by a low level of non-agricultural employment, is 'consumed' away from their place of residence and education. No prospect in the immediate vicinity is a factor that 'pushes away' the rural youth from their background. Therefore, the overall conclusion drawn from the considerations above is pessimistic at its base. Not even a considerable investment in rural education can make it conducive to the development of rural areas without changes in the local environment.

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