

Inequality of Educational Opportunities between Rural and Urban Children: Ensuring Equal Educational Opportunities in Polish Reality

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Abstract: The article addresses the issue of education and its importance for a single person's and the whole society's life. Education is a value and an essential civic right. The study also discusses educational barriers experienced by children and young people from rural areas and identifies educational inequalities, their causes and effects as well. Furthermore, it describes suggestions for changes that are multi-faceted actions which should provide rural children and young people with equal educational opportunities as compared to their urban peers.

Key words: education, educational barriers, educational inequalities, educational opportunities

1. Education as a Determinant of Life Chances in Terms of Individuals and Societies

Education is an essential tool for development of individuals and societies. Nowadays, it provides solutions to numerous problems and social issues. As a factor affecting personal development, education seems to be an important capital which contributes to the labour market. Investments in education enhance the progress of civilization, increase state wealth and make the state internationally more competitive. What is more, education appears to be an asset itself which is manifested by social and cultural development of an individual and a society as a whole. Therefore, educational background is not only a significant factor affecting professional career as well as socio-economic status, but also a kind of investment.

In terms of social policy, education with its universal character and wide accessibility is considered to be a value. The main purpose of education is creative development of each person regardless of age or social background (Maj, 2012, p. 175). In other words, everybody should have access to all levels of education. Young generations, especially, ought to be provided with equal educational opportunities.

Education is a fundamental human right recognised in such international documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) or the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as well as national acts, e.g., the Constitution of Poland or the Act on the School Education System. Education and professional qualifications appear to be forms of protection against unemployment and also investment which will ensure professional development, decent standard of living and career prospects. According to sociological literature, a person with a university degree is less likely to become poor or unemployed and more likely to have a higher income or social status. In Polish society declared and real educational aspirations are increasing. Nowadays, parents expect their children to complete at least secondary education and most of parents want higher education

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degrees for their children (Wolska-Długosz, 2013, p. 43). P. Sztompka (2005, p. 335) claims that in modern societies higher education is one of the most important and socially recognised mechanisms of improving financial status through getting a better job, higher earnings and adequate standard of living. In other words, the level of education and its quality significantly determine a person's life chances. Although created in the present, life chances will always have future reference. Therefore, education "here and now" plays a very important role. It is claimed that life chances are determined by educational opportunities. High level of education in a society means not only better professional qualifications and an increase in living standards, but also higher social consciousness, better understanding oneself, ethical and moral values as well as the complexity of the world (Lubowiecka, 2003, p. 117).

2. Barriers to Accessing Education Faced by Children and Young People

Barriers to education tend to be one of the most important aspects of unequal educational opportunities. Educational barriers should be understood as a social inequality which is manifested by unequal educational opportunities in terms of the process, the level and the quality of education at all stages including primary, secondary and high school education and finally the labour market status of graduates (Matyjas, 2008, p. 189). M. Szymański (2010) identified economic, psychological, cultural, school and educational barriers to the social advancement of children and young people. Furthermore, B. Maj (2012, p. 177) discussed the following barriers which can significantly hinder education or even preclude young generations from meeting their educational needs:

- "economic barrier, when a family lacks of financial assets to provide children with proper education;
- structural (or territorial) barrier associated with general inequalities in certain regions, locations and environments (urban/rural) as well as inequality in access to care and education institutions;
- consciousness barrier visible in the lack of parents' aspirations to meet their children's educational needs;
- other barriers such as health condition (including disabilities), reluctance to continue education, lack of time to learn due to being overloaded with household chores."

The first, economic barrier refers to financial status or financial condition of the family. Unfortunately, the situation of many Polish families is very difficult and Polish social reality is characterised by increasing poverty. There are about 60% of families living at or even below the level of subsistence. Poverty affects particularly the weakest family units: multi-child families, single parent families and families with ill or disabled members (Zablocki et al., 1999; Forma, 2011). Impoverishment of families results in their gradual exclusion from social life. The families are pushed to the margins or edges of society by poverty and millions of people are deprived of civilisation achievements. Poverty contributes greatly to the risk of social impoverishment. This situation affects mainly children and young people. Children from families with low financial status tend to have worse conditions on the threshold of their school education. What is more, they usually choose schools with lower educational standards and finish or break their education earlier than their peers since they want to become financially independent from their parents. These factors significantly affect their start to adult life in the future.

Structural barrier refers to worse educational conditions in small towns and villages as compared to cities. This is proved by social and territorial geography of poverty in Poland (Golinowska, 1996, p. 148). This barrier is characterised by limited access to different educational institutions. Travelling long distances to school or necessity to stay in a boarding school appear to generate significant, additional financial burden on numerous

families and may result in premature school withdrawal.

Consciousness barrier often co-exists along with economic barrier. As T. Kowalak (pp. 135, 202) claims “extremely low income in many families tends to hinder education of young people; what is more, they seem not to understand the value of decent education as a determinant of their children’s future life.” Numerous research prove that poorer families relatively more frequently than other families expect their children to achieve vocational qualifications, whereas well-off families more commonly want their children to complete at least academic education.

The other barriers to education include children’s health condition as well as the type and the level of disability which objectively determine education of young people.

According to M. Szymański (2002, p. 46), educational barriers tend to occur due to the Polish historical heritage (annexations, development of Polish statehood in the interwar period and almost 45 years of socialism in Poland). The new Polish socio-political reality including education began after 1989, which means that 25-year only period is not enough to remove the barriers, but all the actions taken to break them down are bringing positive results.

3. Unequal Educational Opportunities of Rural Children

Modern Polish countryside is considerably diversified and influenced by traditions, the level of farming, location (region of Poland), economy, infrastructure, living conditions, rural residents’ lifestyle as well as their educational background (Matyjas, 2012, p. 53). The processes of urbanisation and modernisation played the key role in changing the image of the Polish countryside. According to J. Papież (2006, p. 57), significant changes occurred particularly after 1989 and after 2004, when Poland accessed the European Union. As J. Wilkin (2010, p. 178) claims, the integration of Poland into the European Union allowed rural residents to catch up with other Polish people, particularly in terms of income, access to infrastructure or education, the sense of optimism, satisfaction with financial conditions and many other determinants of socio-economic status. Besides, most of Polish farmers strengthened their sense of dignity, self-esteem and the sense of stabilisation associated with agricultural policy in Poland.

However, it is emphasized in specialist literature that in spite of the transformation processes, Polish countryside does not provide children and young people with equal educational opportunities as compared to their urban peers. Rural environments significantly differ from well-off and privileged regions particularly in terms of economy, culture and education. It should be highlighted, however, that Polish countryside is structurally, functionally and qualitatively diversified. Therefore, young people living in rural areas will have different living and educational conditions. As K. Szafraniec (2011, p. 365) maintains, the differences between rural and urban environments are still significant. As far as social aspects and conditions for development of rural children are concerned, there are numerous factors which tend to limit their development including insufficient level of education, incompatibility of the professional qualifications with the needs of the local area, lower professional aspirations and ambitions, limited access to the labour market as well as lower standard of living (Szymański, 2004, p. 97).

Unequal living and educational conditions in rural areas are considerably influenced by numerous factors associated with family, school (the system of education) and local environment. Furthermore, economical situation and prospects of rural development tend to be strongly affected by different factors resulting from

generally low economic level, long distances and limited access to social, ICT, educational and cultural infrastructure. Due to these disproportions, rural regions of Poland appear to be less attractive and become the source of barriers to further development. The lack of or poor professional qualifications of rural residents seem to be key obstacles to overcome unemployment and improve economy in rural areas. People with low professional qualifications are less mobile and do not active to meet the needs of the labour market. These are caused by the lack of motivation to continue education as well as limited financial assets to improve professional qualifications (*Strategia rozwoju edukacji*, 2005, pp. 1–2).

According to M. Szymański (2010, p. 30), social inequalities in terms of education are manifested by inadequate to factual individual school achievements, by decrease in correlations between intellectual potential of young people and their future aspirations or plans for further education as well as by poor teaching effectiveness. However, social exclusion, which frequently originates from malfunctions of school and educational system, seems to be the most serious effect of inequalities.

K. Palka (2010) identifies three environmental factors which determine educational inequalities of rural children:

(1) local environment (rural region): dispersion of schools, commuting to school, insufficient number of pre-school institutions, insufficient number of cultural centres and limited access to psychological therapies services;

(2) family environment: difficult financial condition, limited cultural resources (e.g., low level of parents' education), low parents' aspirations, overloading children with household chores, poor parental knowledge of upbringing and ignorance of children's needs;

(3) school environment: poor financial conditions of educational institutions, worse schooling conditions as compared to urban schools (e.g., insufficient number of teaching aids, limited library resources available, lack of sports facilities), low teaching standards (as compared to urban schools), limited or the lack of after-school activities.

To conclude, it should be claimed that educational inequalities of rural children and young people are strongly associated with social, cultural, educational and occupational conditions which, for different reasons, are diversified in each group or society.

4. State Public Actions and Activities to Provide Rural Children with Equal Educational Opportunities

Nowadays, one of the most important social issues in Poland is rural education and its transformation which will provide rural children with equal educational opportunities as compared to their urban peers. These problems and attempts to improve the situation of children from rural areas were addressed in the education system reform in Poland, September 1999, which aimed to:

- improve the level of education in Polish society through popularisation of higher and academic education;
- ensure equal educational opportunities;
- improve education as an integral part of upbringing processes (Ochremiak, 2002, p. 4).

“Educational opportunities are characteristic of well developed society as its essential attribute. Each society which is able to regenerate and develop must affect children and young people so that they could not only perform future tasks or roles, but also enrich them” (Matyjas, 2010, p. 31).

Ensuring equal educational opportunities may have different notions. Z. Kwieciński (2007) claims that equal educational opportunities might be understood with regard to:

- (1) equal rights to competitiveness and enlargement of benefits, where differences are natural and possible to mitigate by volunteer actions;
- (2) equal rights to social advancement protected by well-defined procedures for evaluation and selection;
- (3) equal and public accessibility protected by fair and constantly developed resource distribution;
- (4) providing especially those who are disadvantaged through no fault of their own with equal start, process and effects of education, based on equal redistribution of resources indispensable to take up preventing, therapeutic or rescue actions;
- (5) equal treatment regardless of results or achievements.

D. Waloszek (2002, p. 7) emphasises that educational opportunities may have various aspects and be seen from many different perspectives:

- in the broad, national aspect: future of the nation, family, school, on global scale with reference to transformation processes in education;
- in the local aspect: the future of local region with reference to general national tendencies;
- in the personal aspect: an individual's life, a person's life in the community.

Regardless of the viewpoint, life chances will always have future reference even though they are created in the present. After all, the chances are taken by a person, individually, and the ability to notice the opportunities for one's own development becomes an essential competence of young people.

It is very important for an individual, from social and personal perspective, to take up actions and activities which will ensure equal opportunities for children and young people from rural areas. The government, local authorities and public institutions are obliged to develop educational system and all its components, equal for everyone, without barriers and limitations (e.g., local and environmental factors) to any stage of education. The European Union priority, especially in terms of educational policy, is to provide everyone with equal educational opportunities. Similar approach is visible in Poland where numerous initiatives are taken to remove educational inequalities which affect children in rural areas. This is the main stream of the Polish educational policy. The government and local authorities are obliged to ensure equal and guaranteed by law access to education in terms of structure, programme, staff and financial conditions.

It should be stated that a lot of mechanisms in state social policy are applied to remove inequalities in educational opportunities of children and young people. They include:

- territorially and economically universal accessibility to education, compulsory education until certain age, free of charge obligatory education;
- similar conditions of education system, uniformed standards in educational services and equal opportunities for development of young generations;
- benefits in kind, financial benefits, tax relief and other mechanisms of economic support for families with children
- system of financial and institutional support for students;
- system of financial subsidies and subventions for schools in order to decrease family contribution to education; they will enable children and young people to be educated regardless of cultural and economic condition of family (Kołaczek, 2004, pp. 35–36).

Various non-governmental organisations, associations and foundations provide assistance to rural children so as to ensure equal educational opportunities and to remove any inequalities.

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