

CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE VALUE OF EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RURAL AREAS. THE CASE OF POLAND

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the significance of higher education for changes in the Polish countryside. These transformation are - directly or indirectly - related to changes assigned to the value of education, as well as to structural changes in the entire system of higher education in Poland. Popularization and greater accessibility to higher education has undoubtedly affected rural youth and rural areas themselves to a high degree. The rural areas that until recently had been marginalised were given an opportunity to 'catch up' in terms of educational and civilization progress. It was all possible certainly not only due to institutional changes in education system but also as a result of changes in the mentality of rural inhabitants, opening to new cultural trends and values - and last but not least - substantial aid from the European Union targeted at rural areas. The countryside has undoubtedly used this opportunity.

Key words: functions of education, higher education, rural areas, value of education, youth

INTRODUCTION

Along with the political transformation in Poland, there were significant changes both within higher education and values of education. No doubt they affected rural areas. With the changes until recently marginalized rural areas they have gained a chance to develop and catch up educational and cultural backlog. Rural youth obtained a real chance to get a university diploma and social advancement. There were mental transformation rural inhabitants, which opened up new cultural trends and values finally gained the opportunity to use EU assistance directed to rural areas. Of course, the barriers and the significant social and civilizational differences still exist (eg. in comparison with the city), however, they systematically lose its importance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this article is to present the significance of higher education for changes in the Polish countryside. These

transformation are – directly or indirectly – related to changes assigned to the value of education, as well as to structural changes in the entire system of higher education in Poland. The author uses a macro-perspective and an attempt to show the changes that have taken place in Poland after the transition. Article refers to existing data, in particular the Central Statistical Office reports, the results of research centers of social research and own research on rural youth access to higher education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Structural changes in higher education

Higher education in Poland (and education in general) is one of these areas which have been changing particularly dynamically in the last 25 years. What has undergone transformations are both organisational structures (among others, the network of higher education institutions, number of students, system of recruitment for higher education institutions, forms and system of studying), as well as the attitudes of the youth towards education,

including an significant increase in educational aspirations and level of education among Polish people; education came to be perceived as an important capital which is worth investing into. The change was actually of a revolutionary character, as during the entire period of Polish People's Republic higher education boasted an elite status as a result of: low value of education in the society; a small network of higher education institutions; and existing mechanisms of social selection, which limited the possibility of advancement for youth descending from lower social strata.

Critical problems before 1989 included barriers characterised by structural inequality. They stemmed mainly from an inadequate structure of the educational system with regard both to the youth's aspirations as well as to the demand of the economy. From the research of sociologists dealing with inequality in the access to education among rural youth, it seems clear that what was decisive for their fate within the educational system was the moment of leaving elementary school. The school structure was organised in such a way that a significant number of youth (about 40%) was directed to schools that did not give any chance to obtain a school leaving exam certificate, and at the same time - higher education diploma. Therefore, there was a lot of significance to the bifurcation following elementary school, as it had a major impact on the success or failure in young people's education and life. Young people who went on to schools ending with school-leaving exams, especially to one of very few and elite secondary schools, increased their chances manifold of being accepted to higher education institutions, and, thus, attaining a high social position. In turn, individuals choosing vocational schools, by doing so determined the shape of their career path leading to a low social position and working-class occupation [11]. The structural barriers were particularly severe in the case of youth living in rural areas. This stemmed from several reasons. Firstly, almost all secondary schools were located in urban areas, as opposed to vocational schools, which had a relatively strong representation in rural areas.

Secondly, rural elementary schools possessed a significantly worse infrastructure and equipment, which influenced the level of functioning and the quality of education. Thirdly, the qualifications of teachers in rural elementary schools were far from satisfactory. Structural limitations within higher education system were of no lesser importance. These were systemic, including financial factors (low expenditure), as well as political by nature. As late as in 1989 only 112 higher education institutions were in operation in Poland, and there were only 400 thousand students attending them. The Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education did not exceed 13% in the whole of the post-war period. Higher education - just like all other sections of the economy - was public by nature. A bad situation of higher education, as well as a low level of education of the whole society, was largely a consequence of the educational policy of the state, which was clearly focused on the needs of the industry and educating low-qualified staff. What also had significant meaning was cooling down the educational aspirations through common non-meritocratic rules of professional promotion and non-competitive principles of functioning of the economic sector. This, to some extent, resulted in young people (and their parents) calculating the worthwhileness of education at higher levels. It was particularly visible in rural areas, where the dilemma of household vs school did not pose - from the point of view of the inhabitants of rural areas - a major social problem. Inheriting the household, usually after graduating from a vocational agricultural school, was a common practice [12].

While studying the mechanisms determining social inequalities in a structural dimension, factors of a social-cultural nature must also be mentioned. Without a doubt, they were the main barrier for young people from rural areas to access academic education. These factors were mostly connected to a low cultural capital of a family of rural descent along with rural poverty. Many studies in this field have shown that during the course of family socialisation in peasant (or rural) families the behavioural patterns and value system, that

were reproduced, did not favour educational advancement. It was mostly due to the fact that rural youth "inherited" a low level of educational and professional aspirations, socialised a "worse" language code and, in consequence, chose a shorter school path. They also had visible problems with going through system selection thresholds (school leaving exam, higher education institution entrance exam) [1,3,10,15,19]. This process - rooted at the foundation of the society, i.e. family and local community - could not be stopped even by actions that were structural ideological interventions by nature: introduction of preference points for social descent during higher education institution entrance exams or attempts at changing the recruitment procedure itself.

A different characteristic of the structure of the educational system appeared after the political breakthrough in 1989. Firstly - as a result of a social-political transformation – the whole philosophy of functioning of education had undergone change. On the one hand, there was a departure from the model of higher education for social elites; on the other hand, private subjects were once again (after many years of break) admitted to function on the educational services market. The first private higher education institution after the transformation was created in 1991. As late as in 1990, there were only 112 higher education institutions. Since then, their number has grown dramatically. There were 310 higher education institutions in 2000, 445 in 2005 and 460 in 2010. Currently, there are 438 higher education institutions in Poland (Table 1). Most of them are private. Since the creation of the first private higher education institution in 1991, there are as many as 306 of them at the educational services market [9]. Along with a dynamic development of educational institutions, the number of students has also increased. In the academic year 2005/06 - that is, at the peak of a population boom – the number of students reached more than 1.9 million, which is almost 5 times more than at the beginning of the political transformation. Currently, there are slightly more than 1.5 million students attending higher education institutions in

Poland (Table 1).

Table 1. Higher education in Poland in figures

Academic year	Total number of students (in thousands)	Total number of higher schools	Enrollment rate brutto
1990/91	403.8	112	12.9
1995/96	794.6	179	22.3
2000/01	1,584.8	310	40.7
2005/06	1,953.8	445	48.9
2010/11	1,841.2	460	53.8
2013/14	1,549.9	467	51.5

Source: Higher education and their finance, 1995, 2005, 2014, Warsaw: Central Statistical Office

Such a dynamic increase in the number of students was possible due to high educational aspirations of young people, but also as an effect of scientific politics, which included a conscious element of development of private education, which incorporates almost a third of the total number of students. The described changes brought with them also a whole array of unexpected or even dysfunctional phenomena. The selection threshold, which nowadays decides the fate of young people, has moved upwards to higher levels of education. Currently, it can be placed either at the turn of secondary school and higher education institution or at the turn of higher education institution and job market. This process has enhanced the phenomenon of internal differentiation within particular education levels, starting with junior secondary school and ending with higher education institutions. In consequence, the choice of type of school (e.g. a comprehensive secondary school or a technical secondary school) has lost its significance, whereas allocation in a specific secondary or higher education institution has increased in significance, where the school offers high qualifications, and in the future it improves the chances of attaining a high social position.

Changes in the perception of the value of higher education

The social-political system in dominance

before 1989 significantly determined relations in all areas of life, such as relations between individuals, but also relations between the state and the society. It was manifested in, among others, flattening of the shape of the social structure or abolishing any private property as a source of social inequality. The consequences that followed were non-meritocratic rules within the area of economy: a lack of correlation between the income gained and the level of education possessed, as well as "politicisation" of educational advancement (among others, by favouring the children of party decision-makers, supporting ideological "youth organisations" or introducing points for social descent). Within the area of education, it resulted in a relatively low value of education. Several factors were mutually responsible for that. Firstly, it was the cultural message in peasant and working-class families, which reproduced a traditional system of values, where labour was always valued more than education. Secondly, a low level of rural education in a significant way limited the possibility for young people to access higher education [11]. Thirdly, the fact that intellectual professions (mainly those requiring higher education) were relatively low-paid in comparison with working-class occupations. This, in turn, resulted in prevalence and popularity among rural youth of vocational schools or technical secondary schools.

Although education itself did not present a highly-deemed value for rural youth, it was still perceived as a means of social advancement. It was desired, as it was one of the few ways of leaving the environment where one resided, and of advancing in social hierarchy. It stemmed from the fact that the countryside was valued low as a place of residence. Therefore, for rural youth education was a tool of social mobility, which, at the same time, was always spatial mobility – road to cities [7].

The place of education within the value system of rural youth after the political transformation of 1989 is an entirely different case. Rejection of socialism was followed by a critical attitude to egalitarian ideas and slogans, too. They were replaced with

liberalism and democracy within political-economic sphere and meritocracy within the sphere of desired values and ways to achieve them. Many factors influenced this process; among others, rejection of the previous political system by the society, quick formation of liberal economy or development of private entrepreneurship [13]. They also had a significant influence on market improvement of the meaning of education and its role in the process of professional promotion.

Looking at the contemporary Polish society, it can be seen that education is now one of the most highly-deemed social values. It is so even despite mass popularisation of higher education. In 2013, a considerable majority of Polish people (82%) was of the opinion that education is worthwhile, while it was 76% in 1993 (Table 2). Almost every third person (32%) believes that education has the biggest impact on professional success.

Table 2. Is it worth it to acquire education? (in %).

Is it worth it to acquire education?	1993	2002	2007	2013
Definitely worth and worth	76	91	93	82
Probably not worth and definitely not worth	20	7	5	16
No opinion	4	2	2	2

Source: CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center), 2013.

In both cases, rural youth indicate importance of education and higher education slightly more often than urban youth [6].

Rural youth access to higher education

Before 1989, the countryside, as an entire social system in itself, was virtually excluded from possibility of gaining education at higher levels [21]. It was determined by structural factors (among others, a low level of rural education), social factors (among others, poverty), but also cultural factors (a relatively

low value of education). Only a handful could attend higher education institutions. A handful managed to graduate from these schools, too. This resulted in the fact that the image of an inhabitant of rural areas that was being strengthened was one of an uneducated individual destined to work in agriculture. The paradox of that situation consisted in the fact that the image commonly denoted an entire social group (inhabitants of rural areas), and not only individuals. Hence, the significance of changes that occurred after 1989. They allowed rural youth to have a possibility of education to a never-before-seen extent, and the countryside, regarded as a specific social system, received a chance to slowly rebuild its elites. Although during the period of the Polish People's Republic there were about 60-100 thousand students from rural areas at higher education institutions per academic year, now the number reaches as many as 500 thousand students. These changes mostly indicate a different attitude to education existing in the countryside; they also confirm a high level of educational aspirations of young inhabitants of rural areas [21].

Without a doubt, the positive changes within the area of access to education are indubitable, and rural youth is a direct beneficiary of these changes. Education in the countryside is improving and does not fall majorly behind education in cities, with regard to the quality of education [16]. The differences between rural and urban education stem from such factors as: a lower level of wealth among the inhabitants of the countryside, which has a significant influence on the ability to finance children's education; a low level of cultural capital (influencing specific decisions regarding education) or a poorer network of schools, and the resulting need to commute to schools located in cities. These factors significantly influence or even limit young people's educational choices.

Frequency ratios presented in available data suggest that there has been a definite progress within that field. As late as in the academic year 1999/2000, young people descending from rural areas constituted 23.9% of the total number of students attending higher education institutions [20]. At the same time, the most

recent data provided by GUS (Central Statistical Office of Poland) shows that almost a third of all students are residents of rural areas. The highest indicator of people residing in rural areas was visible in the Internal Affairs Department schools - 46.3%, agricultural schools - 43.6%, and pedagogical schools - 35.6%. The same ratio equals currently 29.6% at universities, 29.8% at higher technical schools and 27.0% at higher medical schools. The smallest amount of people residing in rural areas was found in higher art schools, that is about 16.2%. In all types of higher education institutions, excluding pedagogical schools, the frequency ratios for rural youth have increased [9]. The data included in Social Diagnosis indicates that within the age group 20-24, there are 48.0% rural youth attending education. The same indicator among urban youth, depending on the size of an urban centre, oscillates between 52% and 79%. However, what must be noted is an ongoing process of continuing differentiation of educational ratios depending on the size of the place of residence. The bigger the locality, the bigger the percentage of learning youth is. This also means that rural youth are not closing the distance to urban youth [17,18]. The increase in the frequency ratios for urban youth attending higher education institutions is particularly important in the context of popularisation of education (and "loosening" of its selection function). The results of the research show that rural youth, especially that descending from families of a lower social status and marked by worse educational characteristics, are an indubitable beneficiary of the quantitative changes within Polish higher education [21]. It must also be remembered that it was the development of private higher education that significantly influenced the access to higher education for rural youth. A considerable amount of private higher education institutions was located in smaller urban centres, giving a real chance for taking up higher education to poorer (very often rural) youth, who could not afford leaving for a bigger and more expensive urban centre. Typical academic higher education institutions (mostly public ones) are of urban

character (located mainly in urban centres with over 200 thousand inhabitants), which clearly influences their elitism. During the academic year 2012/13, in eight biggest academic centres in Poland (Warsaw, Cracow, Wroclaw, Poznan, Lodz, Lublin, Gdansk and Katowice) there were as many as 60.9% of the total number of students, and the percentage is growing systematically. Other, smaller academic centres are located evenly in the whole area of Poland, proportionally to population density [9].

Real chances of taking up higher education had a direct translation onto the increase in the level of education among the totality of the inhabitants of rural areas. Until late 1980s, Poland was considered to be a country of poorly educated people. It was particularly visible in the structure of the countryside. As late as in 1988, only 1.8% of the inhabitants of rural areas could boast a higher education diploma, and as many as 60.4% of these residents had elementary education at most, or did not have any formal education at all (Table 3).

Table 3. People aged 13 and more according to the education level (in %)

Educational level	1988		2011	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Higher	1.8	9.4	9.8	21.4
Secondary and postsecondary	13.1	31.8	25.3	35.4
Basic vocational	24.2	23.2	26.4	18.4
Primary and without education	60.9	35.6	34.5	19.2

Source: National Census, 1988, 2011.

The results of the National Census of 2011 indicate a dramatic change in these statistics. In 2011, as many as 9.8% of the inhabitants of rural areas had higher education, which is 5 times as many as in 1988, and 34.7% of the inhabitants of rural areas had junior secondary education at most (Table 3) [14].

The situation of rural youth in the labor market

Certainly, the consequences of social-educational conditions and specific educational choices of rural youth are only seen later, after completing education and entering the job market by these young people. According to the data of the Central Statistical Office, completion of higher education still reduces unemployment. The higher the level of education, the lower the unemployment rate in a given education category is. The unemployment rate in the second quarter of 2014 among persons with higher education was 4.3%; among persons with vocational education it was twice as high, at 8.8%; in the case of persons with secondary education it was three times as much, at 12.5%. An analogous tendency is visible in unemployment ratio among graduates. The higher the level of education, the lower the unemployment ratio among the graduates of a given level of education is. Both correlations occur regardless of the place of residence [8].

Analysing the issues of functionality of education of rural youth in the context of their allocation at the job market, what must not be forgotten is a socially important field of education in broadly perceived agricultural occupations. According to a research conducted by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center), only 4% of parents would want for any of their children to have an occupation connected with either agriculture or environment protection. The only professions with a lower rating in this ranking were that of a politician, a scientist, and occupations connected with sports [5]. The consequence of this state of things is a decreasing demand for education in secondary-level schools of agricultural profile and higher education institutions of the same profile. In turn, a lack of interest of rural youth in education of agricultural profile and course of study may have a negative influence on the functioning of the agriculture and the countryside as a widely perceived social system. This stems from a few essential reasons. Firstly, it is mostly connected with the problem of lack of succession in

agricultural families. Rural youth, undertaking education in non-agricultural occupations (and migrating to cities), unintentionally contribute to the fall of traditional family peasant (agricultural) households. Secondly, lack of qualified staff in the field of agriculture may negatively impact the effectiveness of that area of the economy. Thirdly, the departure of the countryside from agriculture (resulting from the lack of interest in this type of activity among the young generation) may have significant consequences for the countryside as a certain comprehensive social macrosystem. When combined with a progressive urbanisation of rural areas, it can lead to a disintegration of a socially important universe, until recently based on a characteristic set of values connected, among others, to rural religiousness, attachment to the field and a peasant ethos of labour [4].

Role of education in the process of destigmatisation of rurality

One of the main functions of education and educational institutions in rural areas is their role in the process of destigmatisation of rurality. The process of stigmatisation of rurality is a consequence of the process of subjective or objective marking of rural youth with the stigma of a countryside resident - stigma which is characterised by any circulating negative connotations associated with the countryside. The countryside, as a place of residence, becomes not only an objective, external element of life, but also begins to determine individual, subjective features of an individual. In consequence, rural youth do not perceive the countryside - the place of their upbringing and residence - as an attractive and competitive environment in comparison with the city. It is quite the opposite - the countryside appears as a mark which determined life and personal failures, and is unattractive both as a place of residence and as a potential workplace. It is, therefore, a source of unpleasantness not only in an individual dimension (childhood memories), but, above all, in a social dimension determining contemporaneity. It must also be remembered that this process (of social marking) has a relatively limited and varied

power of influence. It is more powerful in relatively isolated societies - in remote villages located far from bigger urban centres. It is less powerful in suburban villages - with better communication with the city, where cultural diffusion and migration movements are relatively balanced and bidirectional. Indubitably, stigmatisation of rurality does not pose such big a problem as even 20-30 years ago [2]. A particular role in the process of destigmatisation of the countryside and rurality is played by educational institutions and educating the youth. The latter can contribute to, on the one hand, providing the social awareness with a new image of Polish countryside based on a young, well-educated generation, and to, on the other hand, acquiring, by members of the society, knowledge and competences contributing to the process of integration of the two environments. The second factor seems particularly important, as education is one of the best ways of combating marking perceived in a subjective manner and complexes deriving therefrom. Therefore, the more educated the society and the higher on the educational ladder the rural youth get, the more effective it will be to get rid of complexes resulting from social descent [21].

CONCLUSIONS

Education in Poland has passed a long and circuitous path of changes. It is, indubitably, still not finished. However, with hindsight, it is worth noticing that the processes which occurred led to very specific, measurable effects, both positive and negative ones, for the state and for the whole of the society. Without a doubt, popularisation of education at the level of higher education significantly influenced rural youth and rural areas themselves. Thanks to them, rural areas, marginalised until recently, have gained an opportunity to "catch up" with educational and civilizational backlog. Naturally, this is not simply an effect of institutional changes within the educational system, but also a change within mental residents of the countryside, of broadening their cultural horizons and opening to new trends and

values, and finally, of a substantial European Union support aimed at rural areas. Notwithstanding, the countryside has taken advantage of the arising opportunity beyond doubt. In this respect, indicators showing the dynamics of change (increase) of the level of education of rural and urban residents are the most suggestive. Thanks to higher education institutions opening their doors wide for students, youth have gained a chance of obtaining dream qualifications and higher education. This resulted in a decrease of a risk of becoming one of the unemployed. Access to education for groups that have been marginalised until now (rural youth and youth descending from families of a low social status) has significantly improved. The beneficiary of these changes is doubtless the rural youth themselves, who received a chance for development and self-realisation, and improving their qualifications.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The article prepared within the project Youth in Transition Countries - the innovative potential, new context, new challenges and new problems, financed by the National Science Centre, (grant no. UMO-2013/08/M/HS6/00430).

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