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## Young People in the Reformed Educational System

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## **YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE REFORMED EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

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The reform of the education system which started in September 1999 was designed, on the one hand, as a response to transformation-related changes which had been taking place since the early 1990s and, on the other, to the globalisation processes in which Poland had also got involved. The reform has three basic objectives:

- adjusting the school structure and educational content to the needs of the contemporary society;
- equality of opportunities for young people from socially disprivileged segments of society;
- popularising education at the secondary level.

A change in the school structure – through the introduction of a new element, i.e. a three-year junior high school after a six-year elementary school – is supposed to serve these objectives. The junior high school is – from the formal point of view – non-selective in character (it does not differentiate children's school paths). Instead, it is supposed to even out differences in the level of pupils' knowledge, as educators are equipped with information about their competence (results of the test following the sixth grade). So this is an element of the education structure designed to minimise the impact of status of the family of origin on students' school attainments. But is it really fulfilling these tasks?

Nowadays junior high school graduates crossed the first formal selection threshold start education in one of the segments of the new school structure: high school, vocational high school, technical school or basic vocational school. Has the introduction of the external appraisal system and the establishment of the junior high school contributed to ensuring equality of educational opportunities (chances to attend a school qualifying for entry into university) to young people from socially disadvantageous groups? Has the relationship between the status of the family of origin and place of residence, on the one hand, and the allocation of individuals in the post-junior-high-school (upper secondary) education structure, on the other, become less pronounced?

What processes are hidden behind the transformation of the secondary-school structure, which has been taking place since the early 1990s. What kind of youth, with what social backgrounds and educational competence, is educated in increasingly numerous high schools and increasingly marginalized basic vocational schools? What are the consequences of the education system changes for educational aspirations of young people, which sharply increased during the transformation period?

This study is an attempt to answer these and many other questions on the basis of data collected in the research project entitled *Young people in the Reformed School System*. The project was implemented in all upper-secondary schools of Toruń and Toruń region in October and November 2003. It covered the whole population of these schools' first-graders – a total of 4,069 pupils. The applied research tool was a questionnaire survey conducted at school. It included questions about parental education and occupation, place of residence, educational plans and career-related aspirations of the students. We also collected information about their results and marks scored at the junior high school exam and their junior high school graduation certificates. The applied research procedure is to some extent a continuation of longitudinal research implemented since the early 1970s, which consisted in tracing the school and life careers of selected age groups. This research, initiated by Zbigniew Kwieciński and then continued by Ryszard Borowicz and Krystyna Szafraniec, has been implemented until the present day<sup>1</sup>.

In our analyses, we focused on four problems of key importance:

- pupils' achievement at school (results of junior high school tests and school marks),
- actual social and school-related selections after leaving junior high school,
- changes in the structure of upper secondary education,
- young people's aspirations.

In our opinion, these are the most important problems in the analysis of the selection threshold following junior high school. On the basis of our research results, we are able to present the beginnings of a new education system emerging in Poland, a system which is now undergoing fundamental reform-related transformation. This allows us to draw a few conclusions as regards the results of the five years of education reform. Moreover, we can venture to make a few predictions concerning changes in the social structure heralded by the educational change.

## 1. Effects of junior-high school work

One of the most distinct distinguishing features of the education system reform is junior high school, established with a view to providing equal educational opportunities to rural youth and young people from families of low social status. Meanwhile, it turns

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<sup>1</sup> See: R. Borowicz, *Plany kształceniowe i zawodowe młodzieży i ich realizacja*, Warszawa 1980; Z. Kwieciński, *Dynamika funkcjonowania szkoły*, Toruń 1995; Z. Kwieciński, *Wykluczanie*, Toruń 2002.

out that results scored by young people at junior high school exams are closely related to the status of their family of origin (of course, this phenomenon is not specific exclusively to the Polish education system). Youngsters from families occupying positions in low-status groups more often score poor exam results, while young people from families of higher-than-average status achieve relatively higher results.

**Table 1.**  
**Junior-high school exam scores depend on family of origin status (in percentages)**

Junior-high school exam score	Family of origin status					Total
	Low	Lower-middle	Middle	Higher-middle	High	
Low (under 19 p.)	14,4	10,1	4,2	1,0	–	6,2
Lower-average (19-27,5 p.)	39,0	34,3	21,8	11,4	1,9	24,0
Average (28-36,5 p.)	35,2	38,9	44,4	30,5	21,8	38,3
Higher-average (37-43 p.)	10,1	14,0	23,5	42,6	52,3	24,2
High (over 43 p.)	1,3	2,8	6,0	14,5	24,1	7,2
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Recourse: research project Youth in the reformed school system, 2003.

At the same time, exam results are to a large extent correlated with school marks. Junior high school did not contribute to minimizing the influence of the status of the family of origin on school achievement. The problem seems even more serious in the light of the fact that the results of junior high school exams scored by pupils from families of low social status are poorer than the level of their school marks. In the case of youngsters coming from families of high social status, the contrary is the case. So one can hardly resist the impression that pupils from low-status families more often “lost” as a result of the introduction of junior high school exams, while those coming from families with high positions in the social hierarchy more often benefited. In this respect, we can say that reform produced a result opposite to what was intended. The more so as the system of external appraisal did not contribute to changing the way in which 16-year-olds select upper secondary schools. There was no revolutionary liberation of aspirations from the intra-school appraisal system. The reason is, first of all, that in the case of some 50 per cent of the surveyed pupils exam results confirmed their earlier educational achievements reflected in school marks. Despite that, as many as four in five representatives of the surveyed young people implemented their plans connected with the selection of upper secondary school. This means that even youngsters

whose exam results did not correspond to marks on their junior high school graduation certificates made correct assessments as to their ability to apply for a place in their “dream” upper secondary school.

Auto-selection continues to play a decisive role in the process of recruitment to schools of different types and categories and all attempts to equalise educational opportunities of young people at the second stage of the education system are belated<sup>2</sup>. In this situation, the opinion that the large-scale and unusually expensive undertaking – i.e. the introduction of junior high school exams – turned out to be fruitless as regards the implementation of some of its objectives seems justified. Educational choices of young people graduating from junior high schools are to a large extent independent of exam results.

The analyses conducted by us show that the effects of the functioning of junior high schools in different communities (rural areas, a medium-sized city and a large city), measured by the level of pupils’ achievement in junior high school exams, are similar.

**Table 2.**  
**Junior-high school exam scores depend on community of living (in percentages)**

Unior-high school exam score	Community				Total
	Rural	Small size city	Medium size city	Large city	
Low (under 19 p.)	7,9	1,2	4,3	6,0	6,3
Lower-average (19-27,5 p.)	28,4	10,8	28,7	22,4	24,2
Average (28-36,5 p.)	38,1	30,1	38,4	38,8	38,1
Higher-average (37-43 p.)	20,6	40,4	20,2	25,3	24,2
High (over 43 p.)	5,0	17,5	8,5	7,5	7,2
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Recourse: research project Youth in the reformed school system, 2003.

Slightly worse results scored by rural youth compared to big-city youth are the result of the impact related to the status of the family of origin. In rural areas, compared to cities, there is a larger share of pupils coming from families of low social status, while it is exactly this category of young people whose exam results are markedly poorer. Exam results of rural and big-city youth are similar for the same family-of-origin categories. Should the credit for this go to the reform of the education system imple-

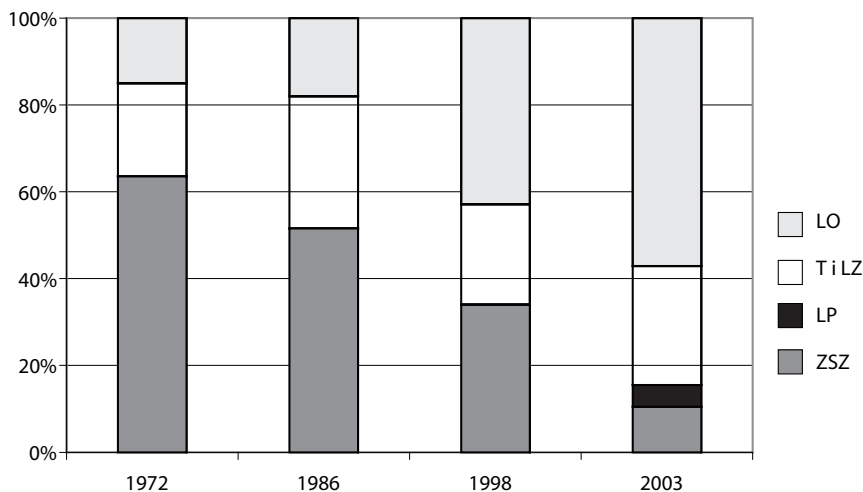
<sup>2</sup> See: R. Borowicz, *Nierówności społeczne w dostępie do wykształcenia. Casus Suwalszczyzny*, Olecko 2000.

mented for five years now? The material we have at our disposal does not allow us to provide an answer to the question posed in this way. It is possible that the evening out of the level of educational competence represented by rural and big-city youth has resulted from the decrease in the educational competence of young urban residents, something which was already noticeable soon before the reform<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Changes in the structure of upper secondary education

Another visible effect of the education system reform, apart from the introduction of junior high schools, is a fundamental change in the structure of upper secondary education. Despite the fact that transformation in this segment of the system had been taking place since the early 1990s, the process accelerated in the past five years. By 1998, i.e. over eight years, the percentage of young people attending basic vocational schools decreased from around 50 per cent to 30 per cent. The next five years were enough to bring this percentage down to 10 per cent. And the percentage of people planning to end their education at this level amounts to a mere 0.8 per cent. Therefore, changes in the structure of secondary education which had been taking place by 1998 and their continuation after 1999 contributed to the implementation of one of the three main reform objectives: popularisation of secondary education (one which qualifies graduates for entry into university). At present 60 per cent of young people attend high

**Fig. 1**  
Structure of de secondary education level in Toruń region between year 1972 and 2003



Recourses: Z. Kwieciński, *Wykluczanie*, Toruń 2002; Research project Youth in the reformed school system, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See: Z. Kwieciński, *Wykluczanie...*

schools, 25 per cent – technical schools. A new element in the education system – vocational high schools – are attended by only 5 per cent of the 16-year-olds in Toruń<sup>4</sup>.

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What is the mechanism of this structural change in upper secondary education? Since the beginning of the 1990s main mechanism of selection was inclusion of the best skilled pupils into high schools. This was really *Royal Path of Education* (term used by M. Kozakiewicz<sup>5</sup>) leading to the best occupational and social positions. As many research showed that educational path involved mainly children from families placed higher in social positions. This mechanism changed in the middle 1990s when the inclusion mechanism of the best turned into exclusion of the worse skilled into basic vocational schools. Nowadays they are really excluded from the main education current, which is the beginning of social exclusion process. This is a very homogenous group, both in respect of their school competence and social background.

Does the fact that 60 per cent of all pupils attend high schools mean that the level of their competence is so high? It turns out that the popularisation of education at the level qualifying for university entry has been accompanied by differentiation within school types. Our research results indicate not only essential differences in the level of school achievement among high school students, technical school students and vocational high school students but also differences within individual school types, in which it is possible to distinguish categories of schools whose pupils represent quite different levels of educational competence.

**Table 3**

**The school achievements (school marks and junior high school exam score) in different types of secondary schools**

School achievement	The secondary school types				Total
	High school	Vocational high school	Technical school	Basic vocational school	
Very low	1,4	8,6	7,0	44,5	7,4
Low	5,8	22,7	19,5	30,1	12,7
Lower-average	10,6	22,2	27,5	14,9	16,2
Average	23,5	25,4	30,6	7,2	24,0
Higher-average	21,6	15,1	10,3	2,4	16,4
High	20,9	4,9	3,9	0,5	13,5
Very high	16,1	1,1	1,1	0,3	9,8
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Recourse: research project Youth in the reformed school system, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> See: *ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> M. Kozakiewicz, *Bariery awansu poprzez wykształcenie*, Warszawa 1973.

Vocational high schools and technical schools are attended by young people of average and below-average educational competence. Basic vocational schools gather students with lowest school achievements. High schools are more differentiated, but it is clearly seen that they gather the best part of junior high school graduates. As it is the largest part of secondary education level it is not surprising that high schools vary greatly from one another. Some of them are attended by young people with outstanding educational achievements, others by pupils with above-average achievements and there are also schools which group together pupils with average and below-average competence. So in fact these schools do not differ in this respect from vocational high schools and technical schools.

Therefore, a rise in the number of high school pupils resulted in lowering the threshold for access to this type of education. Practically everybody who has achieved average school results has a chance to start education at a high school. But this does not mean that the competence of pupils attending different schools is equalised downwards. We can observe division into five categories of secondary schools:

**Schools of category A** – grouping together young people with outstanding achievements

**Schools of category B** – grouping together young people with above-average achievements

**Schools of category C** – grouping together young people with average achievements

**Schools of category D** – grouping together young people with below-average achievements

**Schools of category E** – grouping together young people with lowest achievements

Basic vocational schools are all in category E. Category D groups technical schools, vocational high schools and also high schools. In category C we find similarly technical schools vocational high schools and high schools. Category B and A are grouping only high schools.

As recently as the mid-1990s pupils with average and below-average school achievements, who now attend high schools, would not have a chance for this type of education owing to their insufficient educational competence. The educational potential of these youngsters is much lower compared to the potential of their peers who attend high schools which group together pupils representing above-average and outstanding school achievements. This means it is impossible to implement curricula at a similar level in all schools of this type, despite the fact that the schools are formally obliged to follow the same programme of education. The equalisation of opportunities through placing a pupil in a school which formally provides the same education as traditional high school, coupled with the low level of competence represented by all youngsters attending this type of school, is a fiction and a sort of deception. You cannot change a vocational school (until recently these buildings were occupied by technical schools,



basic vocational schools and primary schools) into a high school by merely changing the sign board. In any case, such a high school will not be of the same sort as schools which once constituted the “royal educational path”.

### 3. Social selections in secondary education

Secondary schools differ not only in regard to the school competence of their pupils but also in regard to their social background. This of course is rooted in the correlation between school attainments and the status of the family of origin. Therefore, different school environments which are formed as a result of different levels of their pupils' competence also constitute separate social environments. Consequently, school selections continue to be social in character. They channel young people with different backgrounds into separate educational paths. Despite the fact that young people from families with lower social status now have easier access to schools qualifying for university entry, most of them attend technical schools, vocational high schools and those high schools which group together pupils representing average and below-average school competence (schools category D and C). Schools attended by junior high school graduates with above-average and outstanding educational competence form elitist environments also from the social point of view.

**Table 4**  
**Social environment in schools of each category**

Family of origin social status	School category					Total
	cat. A	cat. B	Cat. C	cat. D	cat. E	
Low	1,4	6,5	14,7	22,4	38,2	15,8
Lower middle	7,2	13,3	22,1	26,5	30,9	20,5
Middle	33,7	49,0	51,2	44,0	28,3	44,3
Higher middle	23,1	16,4	7,2	5,1	2,2	9,9
High	34,6	14,7	4,7	1,9	0,5	9,4
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Recourse: research project Youth in the reformed school system, 2003.

We have found that the education structure is divided into three social worlds:

- the world of basic vocational schools, dominated by young people from families of low social positions,
- the world of schools qualifying graduates for university entry (high schools, vocational high schools, technical schools), which are more varied socially and are dominated by pupils from families of medium social status, with a considerably strong presence of young people from low-status families,
- the world of schools forming socially elitist environments, dominated by pupils from high-status families.

We can see that neither the introduction of junior high school nor formal popularisation of education qualifying for university entry leads to the equality of educational and social chances of young people. Of course one could defend the thesis that educational opportunities have been equalised thanks to the popularisation of high schools by pointing to the fact that fundamental selection processes now take place during enrolment to universities and colleges or perhaps even later, at a moment of entering the labour market. Nowadays 90 per cent of the young are in educational paths which enable them to continue education at the college and university level. In this sense, we have to do with equality of opportunities. However, there are two aspects to which attention should be paid: firstly, different levels of young people's aspirations, and secondly, the impact of their staying in homogenous educational and social environments in the course of secondary education.

#### 4. Students' aspirations

Although the young generally show very high aspirations as to their education and professional career, it is clearly visible that the level of aspirations differs depending on social background.

**Table 5**  
**Students' educational aspirations dependence on social status of family of origin**

Educational aspirations	Family of origin social status					Total
	Low	Lower middle	Middle	Higher middle	High	
Basic vocational	2,4	1,2	0,4	–	–	0,8
High school	45,6	36,2	20,6	5,7	1,6	24,4
Licencjat	15,4	14,2	14,1	8,7	4,5	12,9
Tertiary	29,0	34,4	45,4	59,0	59,2	43,2
Tertiary plus	7,7	14,0	19,5	26,6	34,7	18,7
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Recourse: research project Youth in the reformed school system, 2003.

The young from families with lower positions on the social ladder do want to break off the status of their family of origin through a longer education path but their ambitions are always one step below the level of aspirations represented by their peers from average and higher-than-average social strata.

Especially disquieting in this respect is the situation of rural youth whose school achievements have been comparable with achievements of their urban peers. Despite that, young rural residents tend to start education in vocational high schools, technical schools and high schools grouping together pupils with average or below-average school competence. And as regards the level of educational aspirations, rural youth falls behind

urban youth. It turns out that at higher levels of the education system and in the sphere of educational plans rural origin restricts life aspirations in this category of the surveyed generation<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore, the described school segments constitute paths which group together young people of a similar school competence level, status of the family of origin and a similar level of aspirations – related both to education and professional career. Joining a group of this kind marks a beginning of the process in which the person's aspirations are consolidated through relationship with people sharing the same outlook on life. Individual educational paths not only equip people in different levels of competence but also consolidate different aspirations.

In this way, the school selection process at the first selection threshold marks the beginning of channelling pupils' biographies. The result of this channelling will probably appear as early as the moment of selecting the type of university and college education. As mass secondary education is becoming increasingly varied internally, higher (tertiary) education is also subject to differentiation.

But even at this stage, selection processes will be proceeding according to their own rhythm and young people's high educational aspirations can be fulfilled owing to enormous internal differences at each level of the education system. Consequently, the scenario according to which the high level of educational aspirations may contribute to an eruption of frustration at higher stages of the education process does not seem very probable.

This does not mean, however, that this generation – thanks to changes in the education system – will achieve “full personal fulfilment.” Looking at young people's educational and career-related aspirations, one can venture to propose certain hypotheses related to possible scenarios of social structure development. Are we really facing an imminent structural revolution and formation of a knowledge-based society?

Considering the structure of young people's educational aspirations, one can expect deep changes in the structure of the nation's education. The young are well aware of the requirements set by the contemporary labour market and want to gain qualifications which their parents do not have. Formally, this generation will definitely achieve a higher level of education than their parents. Their education in the changed school system, adjusted to new economic conditions, has a different character (one of its basic features is the duration of schooling – the process of young Poles' education will certainly be longer than their parents'). Thus a shift in the level of education to a higher level (at least secondary) is clearly visible. The future will show what changes will take place in the structure of occupational positions. There will certainly appear categories of people (they are already appearing) who can hardly be classified according to contemporary classification standards.

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<sup>6</sup> K. Górlach, Z. Drąg, Z. Seręga, *Młode pokolenie wsi III RP. Aspiracje życiowe w przeddzień integracji z Unią Europejską*, Warszawa 2003.

A separate problem is the question of distances between social strata. Looking at the differences in educational and social aspirations of young people depending on the status of the family of origin, one can see that despite relatively high hopes for the future in all social groups, these ambitions have different ceilings for different social categories. The young from families in which parents have university-level education are relatively more ambitious than the young from low-status families. The popularisation of education at the secondary and higher level does not mean at all that distances are reduced. It only results in the devaluation of university degrees and moving the whole population one stage upwards in the education structure. Consequently, we have to do with a situation when a university degree is not a guarantee of employment nor prestige but when you do not have such a degree you are excluded from the mainstream of social life. One can say that to have a good education is not a big deal but not to have one is a disaster.

Aspirations as to education and professional career, especially when declared at the age of 16, at the start of building one's individual social path, are not an absolute and unchanging indicator of the direction of change in the social structure. This is so because in the course of education these aspirations can be subject to modification as young people learn more about conditions on the labour market. Moreover, the education process itself – in different school types – can considerably modify young people's aspirations. As a result the young may come to the conclusion that their initial plans have been unrealistic, silly, senseless and not worth the trouble or just the contrary – their ambitions may be fuelled and they may receive motivation to increased effort. The data collected in the repeatable "Toruń surveys" clearly indicate that in the course of education in an upper elementary school aspirations are gradually cooled down and tailored to the situation on the labour market. This process takes place in all school types. However, aspirations of basic vocational school students decrease the most, while aspirations of high school students – relatively the least. The most important intervening factor is the status of the family of origin.

Considering that the change in school structure is only on the surface and the same mechanisms which functioned before the reform continue to be in place, one can expect that in the course of secondary education young people's social ambitions will be curbed and will become more realistic. But it is clearly noticeable that the young are looking for quite different occupations for themselves than their fathers and mothers did. There is a trend to seek jobs connected more with information processing and services than production. And this is probably the sphere where the most important changes related to the occupational structure will take place – transition "from a society of workers to a society of people behind the desk." At the same time, one should be aware that white-collar work, "behind the desk," does not determine these days a specific level of prestige, income or influence – the indicators of social status. Both a secretary and the manager of an enterprise in which this secretary is employed belong to the group of people dealing with information processing. At the same time, they would both have university-level education. The formal level of education loses in importance.

Perhaps it is the labour market that is becoming the main selecting factor. Having the same qualifications (formally), we will take different occupational positions and they will determine our social status.

## 5. Conclusions

Our analysis shows clearly that educational reform which started in 1999 in Poland has not achieved its all goals. Perhaps it is too early to find it in educational structure which nowadays occurs. As we could see in this paper junior high school does not minimise the influence of the status of the family of origin on school achievement, popularisation of high school education and equalisation of educational opportunities are apparent. Wider attendance into high schools, vocational high schools and technical schools does not mean higher educational skills in population. That is still related to family of origin status, as the level of educational aspirations of pupils. We can observe creation of new educational paths within secondary education level, related now to categories of school in respect of pupils' educational competence. That new division into schools for the young with outstanding competence, more than average, average, lower than average and low competence level is an important factor in the sociological analysis of educational system. This is also an important issue for educational policy.

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