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Rural environment – a space for school education of children

*Good school education in childhood
and at young age sows seeds
that can bear fruit throughout
entire lives.*

Pope Francis

ABSTRACT: The article discusses rural environment as a space for school education of children. At the beginning, it looks into the concept of “environment” and its typology in the context of social pedagogy. Subsequently, the rural environment and its transformation processes, including contemporary times, are characterized – two important dates that contributed to them, i.e. 1989 and 2004 are mentioned – “Rural Poland 2018. The report on the State of Rural Areas”. Rural education has been discussed in the context of rural characteristics and proved to be as diversified as Polish rural environment. Based on the literature analysis, it can be assumed that, in spite of dynamic transformation processes affecting both rural and urban societies, the quality of rural education is lower as compared to education in urban areas.

KEYWORDS: Environment, rural environment, rural education.

Introduction

The concept of environment, from the perspective of social pedagogy, is understood in multidimensional and general terms, depending on the

adopted theoretical and cognitive assumptions. They imply a perception of the environment, which is usually bipolar: 1) as a structure that is external in relation to the individual, or 2) as a psychosocial space – a source of intersubjective factors that co-determine human development; this is the so-called “lifeworld” (Lalak 2007, p. 45). This dichotomous division of the environment was highlighted by Aleksander Kamiński (1978), who pointed to its objective and subjective meaning. It should be added that both meanings permeate each other, the external (objective) environment shapes, processes and organizes the internal (subjective) structures of the individual. This is because the external environment is connected with its individual dispositions.

The combination of both approaches is visible in the definition by Ryszard Wroczyński (1985, p. 78), who defined the environment as “the components of the structure surrounding an individual that act as a set of stimuli and trigger specific psychological reactions”. This definition can be considered as universal, formulated on the basis of behavioral – functional theory. The quoted author distinguished three types of environments: natural, social and cultural (Wroczyński 1985, p. 79) – the criterion of division was the type of stimuli influencing the individual. As stated by Danuta Lalak (1999, p. 299) the environment is a complex, physical, mental, social and cultural network of interactions between man and the outside world, which is constantly changing, creating new forces – building or destroying, slow or rapid – for which man must be equipped with cognitive, analytical, sociotechnical and organizational skills. Man must be able to change the external world in a desired way, giving this process its proper direction.

The concept of the environment, apart from the one mentioned and described above, is also used in social pedagogy, especially in the case of the pedagogy empirically oriented towards the description of two categories, i.e. city and village. This division was created with regard to territorial and demographic – economic features. The urban and rural environment is therefore distinguished as two areas of life for individuals, groups and communities that are studied in a multidimensional and multifaceted perspective. Their difference in terms of history, sociology, upbringing, socialization and education seems to be obvious and significant; worthy of social and pedagogical research, especially when it concerns children.

The city and the village are “the most typical areas of living space, where different cultures, traditions, systems of social relations and styles of upbringing are formed”. (Pilch 2007, p. 418). In my further deliberations I will focus on the rural environment as a space for school education of children,

referring to the research I have conducted in rural families, outlining various areas of childhood resulting from living conditions and education.

Polish village – notion, typologies and characteristics

The notion of village and rurality, which is a synonym of rural features, undergoes transformations related to changes occurring in rural space, but also changes in the whole society, its system of values and functions that it sets for “its” village (Matyjas 2012, p. 43). Defining the term “village” is very important for scientific research, because it translates into practice. Another scope of the concept is determined by definitions formulated from the perspective of social policy, sociology (of village), ethnology, cultural studies, or pedagogy (especially social pedagogy). Pedagogues are primarily interested in the village, defined as an environment (natural, social, cultural, educational, objective and subjective).

In the encyclopedic approach, a village is a settlement unit with a compact, concentrated or dispersed development and existing agricultural functions or related service or tourist functions, without municipal rights or city status. The definition of a village depends on a given criterion. They are as follows:

- demographic criterion (number of inhabitants);
- administrative criterion (number of inhabitants and type of local authority in the territory);
- employment criterion (mainly on a farm);
- multifactorial criterion (takes into account demographic, geographical and economic features of a given locality) (Papież 2007, pp. 424–425).

The criterion most frequently used when defining a village is the last one. Many factors are taken into account here, but functionality and descriptive features dominate. An example of this type of definition is the one proposed by Tadeusz Pilch (2007, p. 420), who, while describing a village, listed its most important features, components and functions. They are as follows:

- small community and spatial limitation;
- sense of unity and sense of relative isolation;
- dominance of agricultural nature of work and institutions;
- social character of service and culture institutions;
- specific structure of personal and institutional authorities;
- division of work and services;
- dominance of nature and the nature-based rhythm of working life;
- folk culture and folklore as important components of consciousness;

- pressure of the external world of information and culture;
- progressive disintegration of ties under the influence of migration, urbanization and cultural factors;
- increasing intergenerational internal conflicts;
- specific role of school and the teacher.

To sum up, a village is a small social structure functioning in a specific territory, which is characterized by a lower population density than in cities, and the dominant type of activity is work in agriculture. A specific type of social relations (family-neighborly relations associated with long-term residence) and some specific cultural features, e.g.: important role of tradition, importance of oral communication, exposed role of authority of elderly people, conservative tendencies, are also pointed out. Such a description/definition of a village is, according to Krzysztof Gorlach (2004, p. 14), a concept of a relatively precisely defined homogeneous system.

It is worth noting that a village that meets the described definition does not exist. Polish villages are diversified in terms of their function, structure, economy, culture, society and education. They cannot be characterized according to a single model. Therefore, the term “village” is now being replaced by the term “rural area”, which has slightly different characteristics than those set out above. Rural area is an area located outside the administrative boundaries of cities, it also includes cities with up to 5,000 inhabitants and cities with up to 20,000 inhabitants, where there are no high schools finishing with a baccalaureate. This means that rural areas are rural municipalities or rural parts of urban-rural municipalities (the criterion of separation was established on the basis of the territorial division according to the TERYT register, i.e. National Official Register of the Territorial Division of the Country). Rural areas consist of 1566 rural municipalities and 608 urban-rural municipalities (Wilkin, Nurzyńska 2010). In Poland, rural areas, which determine the present-day landscape of the country, occupy over 93.2% of the total area of the country and are inhabited by 14.8 million people, i.e. 38.8% of the country’s population.

Rural areas are also described in sociological and pedagogical literature in the aspect of their social structure, functionality, culture, state of education, etc. (the multifactorial criterion).

In the literature there is a rich list of principles of division of villages and rural areas. They are distinguished according to their size, distance from the city, administrative functions, as well as, inter alia, ethnic reasons, spatial arrangement, development and stagnation index, type of agricultural production or area of farms, etc. (Pilch 2007, p. 420).

And thus Włodzimierz Winclawski (1976, pp. 58–59) distinguished a traditional village, a conservative village, a village of an industrialized region and a suburban village. However, such a typology of villages does not work today, as they do not exist in clear form. Rarely do we find a traditional village today. This is a result of the changes that took place in Poland after 1989, which will be discussed in more detail in the further part of my deliberations.

Another, more contemporary typology of villages, which is used in social pedagogy, was presented by Stanisław Kawula (2001, p. 472). He distinguished:

- villages with predominant individual farms, with partial isolation from urban environments;
- centrally located villages – with multifunctional structure, with the seat of municipal offices;
- former state-farm villages;
- recreational and tourist villages;
- suburban villages;
- agrocomplexes as concentrations of individual villages.

Each type is assigned its own features, which form the characteristics of the village; it is up to the researcher to decide which of them are dominant. Pedagogy emphasizes such features of a village as: community, functionality, interactivity, infrastructure, “human forces” in the community capable of transforming the existing reality, as well as educational institutions operating in the village.

The term related to a village is the aforementioned rural area. The concept of typology of rural areas was also developed in the structures of the European Union. Three types of rural areas were distinguished:

- 1) modernized areas, being under pressure of a modern lifestyle, located close to urban centers, experiencing population growth, with minimal significance of agriculture, diversified use of land by agriculture, industry and for recreational purposes;
- 2) “declining” areas, undergoing depopulation, with a relatively high level of importance of agricultural economy, but fading possibilities of obtaining employment due to technical progress;
- 3) marginalized areas, undergoing the process of depopulation and dominated by agriculture, with little possibilities of diversified economic activity due to low level of infrastructure and various services (Gorlach 2004, p. 237–238).

The presented division and characteristics of the areas it includes may be useful in social research: sociological, pedagogical or political. Social pedagogy

is mainly interested in the third area, i.e. the village as a marginalized area. The diagnosis of current social, cultural, educational, professional and digital conditions of the inhabitants of a given rural area is the basis for the development of directions of assistance and support, as well as specific solutions equalizing life chances of particular individuals, groups and local communities in rural areas, i.e. such modernization, reorganization of the environment, with the use of human resources, which should lead to its improvement (according to H. Radlińska it is one of the basic tasks of social pedagogy) (Matyjas 2012, p. 52).

Regardless of the term used: village, rural area, rural environment, its meaning includes such elements as: geographical location, administrative affiliation, population density, dominant type of farms, social and age structure of the inhabitants of a village, infrastructure, functions performed by a given rural environment in relation to the population: economic, cultural, educational and other, network of public services, tourism, the existence or not of the Church as one of the very important centers of practicing faith, engaging in community and charitable activities. The above mentioned elements, constituting various criteria of characteristics and functioning of villages (the so-called mixed criteria), are useful in social research, also in social pedagogy. They point to the diversity of rural environments in Poland and their constant transformations: demographic, economic or socio-cultural. They were initiated in 1989, when the political and social system changed, and continued and developed after 2004, that is after Poland's accession to the European Union. These changes shaped and continue to shape the image of the Polish village. In many cases we can speak of positive aspects such as the transformation of the social and professional, educational and cultural structure of villages, the modernization of the residential environment, the modernization of the rural way of life, the system of values and life aspirations. The changes in rural environments are also accompanied by negative phenomena, including: depopulation (outflow of young people from villages), "grabbing" the rural landscape by urban inhabitants (tourism, destinations, "circular" migration) and weakening of interpersonal ties between inhabitants ("global" hurry, overwork) (Matyjas 2012, pp. 114–115).

The last three decades have brought significant, and in many cases beneficial, changes in villages, although they are still far from the changes taking place in cities (Kutiak 2001). Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska (2010), speaking about rural communities, uses the term "success of belated transformation", which means that changes in agriculture are slower than in other areas of life (including the city), but in a direction that most experts consider desirable.

This means that the Polish village is changing very dynamically and is capable of forming a developmental impulse.

The positive changes that are taking place in Polish villages are confirmed by the latest “Report on the State of Rural Areas. Rural Poland 2018”. It shows that the time after Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004 (until now) has been the most beneficial time for farmers and rural inhabitants in the 100-year history of independent Poland – Polish village and agriculture. According to J. Wilkin, the editor of the report, the EU membership introduced revolutionary changes in the conditions for the development of Polish agriculture, agricultural policy, the economic situation of farms and the living conditions of the rural population.

In the light of the report the direction of changes in villages and its effects seem to be optimistic, but it does not mean that we can speak of a positive picture of all rural environments. This is because Polish villages are diverse: structurally, functionally, socially, culturally or educationally. The situation of farmers, rural families is internally differentiated and depends on many factors/criteria. These may include: the size of the farm (small and medium farms up to 20 ha of UAA are predominant on the territory of Poland), the level of income obtained, investment plans, farmers’ education, living conditions of the rural population and others.

The research of Z. Kwieciński (2002), M. Kwiecińska-Zdrenka (2004), J. Papież (2006), T. Pilch (2016) and others shows that rural areas (still) seem to be a space that dangerously concentrates a range of deficiencies (low incomes of inhabitants, weakness of the rural labor market, labor shortage, “depopulation” of villages, foreign migration of young people, worse educational, cultural and sports infrastructure than in the city, digital “underdevelopment”, lack of communication with cities and others). Such perception of rural environments leads to reflection on the educational situation of children in villages, which should create the best possible conditions for learning, development of aspirations, constituting the basic determinants of success in life (especially professional success).

School education of children in rural environments

The field of modern education in rural areas is not homogeneous because it consists of different conditions/factors characterizing a given village. This is because rural environments are diverse in terms of social economy, culture, ecology, infrastructure, administrative affiliation (municipality, city-municipality) – small, medium, large; suburban, situated far from cities, with

different geographical locations (Poland A and B – the so-called eastern wall). The above mentioned conditions are decisive for education in villages. It should be added that it depends not only on local authorities in a given area, but also on central authorities, which make a great deal of effort to ensure that the educational conditions of rural and urban children are similar (staff, their education, curricula, school equipment, Internet access and others).

Speaking of education in villages, it should be mentioned that in rural areas there are 11.4 thousand pre-school facilities (kindergartens, kindergarten units, pre-school education complexes and day-care facilities), which constitutes 52.5% of all kindergartens in Poland (data from 2014). At the same time the number of primary schools is 8.6 thousand (over the last decade the number of schools decreased by 12.5%). As regards middle schools (currently they are being gradually liquidated, their role will be taken over by 8-year-old primary schools), there were 51.5% of them in villages, which constituted 35.2% of all middle schools in the country (GUS [Central Statistical Office], *Obszary wiejskie w Polsce w 2014, 2016*, pp. 181–186).

The presented data indicate that there is a large number of children and young people living and receiving education in villages, who need to be provided with the best possible conditions for education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1992) states that every human being has the right to education, and the aim of education is not only to transmit knowledge but also to fully develop the human personality. Education is therefore compulsory until the age of 18, and public authorities are to ensure general and equal access to education.

The human right to education should not be restricted to the teaching process in schools, which is why the wording – the right to education, which includes the right to teaching and social education – seems to be legitimate. Education is a “holistic process in which, in any democratic society, parents make every effort to communicate their beliefs, culture and other values to their children”. (Nowicki 2002, p. 431). It is worth to emphasize the definition of education by Z. Kwieciński (1991, pp. 89–90), which accentuates the subjective (regardless of the location of the school in a given environment) dimension of education and in which it is to serve the creation of one’s own concept of self, the design and implementation of a personal development strategy. According to the quoted author, education is the sum of all the influences on individuals and groups of people, influences favoring such their development and use of their abilities, so that they become maximally conscious and creative members of the social, national, cultural and global community, and so that they become

capable of active self-realization, unique and lasting identity and individuality, and are able to develop their own Self by undertaking suprapersonal tasks, by maintaining the continuity of their own Self in the course of performing distant tasks (Kwieciński 1998, p. 37–38).

The definitions of education given above show that it is the individual who should be responsible for clarifying their own preferences and using their potential. What is important here is the element of self-education, because it also contributes to achieving success in life. Education is therefore understood holistically, not only as institutional education (school), but also as self-development. It is the basis for human development and social integration. Education is nowadays treated as one of the most important human activities (at every stage of life, although the period of childhood and youth is dominant), the aim of which is to change the quality of life. It is considered a fundamental right and universal value (Matyjas 2012, p. 87). As stated by Kazimierz Denek (1999, p. 61): “The challenges of the 21st century can only be met by a comprehensively educated man, who is capable of thinking in innovative and alternative categories, is energetic, efficient, sensitive to values, recognizing them as directives of conduct, signposts of life, or in other words, a complete man”. Such a direction of education, taking into account the individual and social factor, is right.

For students, especially those from rural areas, education (school and self-education) is an opportunity and an investment in the future. That is why its quality is so important from an individual and social point of view. The quality of education in rural schools depends on many factors. These include:

- type of local/rural environment (size and wealth, territorial and geographical location);
- size of school (primary and middle school), which also includes the number of grades – classes of students in a given age bracket;
- the school running authority (public and non-public schools, community schools, schools run by associations, trade unions);
- teaching staff (their education, including degrees and in-service training, work experience);
- school equipment, e.g. day-room, gymnasium, sports field, computer, language, history classroom, etc.;
- cooperation with parents, their involvement in the school;
- extra-curricular activities (in-school activities – interest groups and after-school activities – classes, events, actions organized by the local community in the broad sense of the term (cultural center, housewife’s association, parish).

These factors differentiate the education of children in rural areas (within particular types of villages, but also with regard to towns, where they are usually more advantageous in comparison to villages). Because, as I mentioned earlier, the rural environment is diverse, so is the case for rural schools. There are better and worse ones, as evidenced by the results of the final exams; the rate of students continuing their education at secondary school in the city or enrolling at university.

Many authors characterize the rural environment, education in rural schools as worse than in cities (Kwieciński 2002; Pilch 1999; Szymański 2004). They point to the low quality of teaching in rural schools, which is a barrier to the access to further education. T. Pilch (2016) writes even about the failure of education policy in villages, especially in relation to the poor regions of Warmia and Mazury. He actually speaks about the birth of educational, and as a consequence, also professional and life inequalities (prestige, social status) that affect children in the analyzed schools of this region. It should be stressed that the area analyzed by Pilch and his team is a former state-owned land. Unfortunately, they are poor in terms of economy, culture, infrastructure, etc. Here the changes are slow (a plus for the social family programs currently being implemented) and the equalization of educational opportunities for children in these areas will be difficult, time-consuming – even in relation to the general situation of rural schools in Poland.

The economic situation of children from rural environments is presented in the table below.

The characteristics of education in rural environments presented above show that the unequal educational opportunities of children from these environments are mainly determined by economic, social and cultural factors, as well as differences in the development of the educational system (Chrzanowska 2009, p. 52 et seq.).

Children from rural areas on their educational path encounter many barriers that block their chances for development and usually cause them to have worse school results, limited possibilities of developing interests, learning foreign languages, correct language of communication, more modest educational and professional plans and aspirations, and in consequence a more modest life. As a result, they have lower sense of personal worth and self-esteem (Matyjas 2012, p. 90).

Table 1. Education of children in rural environments in the context of their unequal opportunities (barriers)

Educational system in the village	Situation of children (educational barriers)
<p>Organization of the education system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – school system and structure – location of schools – programs – training of teachers – financing education – evaluation of educational results <p>Functioning of the school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – dominant models of teaching – organizational culture of the school – evaluation – stigmatization – selection – sorting – reproduction 	<p>– Barriers related to the material situation of their own families – disadvantageous situation of children due to the low status of many rural families (unemployment, poverty, low level of education, low pedagogical knowledge of parents).</p> <p>According to Z. Kwiecieński (2002, p. 55) “[...] this continuing relationship between the low status of parents and their children’s entry into the sphere of cultural poverty is an inseparable spiral of cultural and socio-occupational exclusion”.</p> <p>– Lack of access to schools (mainly middle schools) in the place of residence.</p> <p>Many kindergartens and primary schools with a small number of students were closed down due to financial reasons. The majority of municipalities in rural areas cannot afford to support small schools. A local school gave children not only education and certificates, but also – at least occasionally – an idea for spending their free time, which usually they have to organize themselves. Children from areas where primary schools were closed down are forced to change the environment, where they feel worse and alienated. They are often misunderstood by teachers. As stated by D. Waloszek (2002, pp. 76–77) “[...] the children from post-state farms are in a lower position in the classroom or kindergarten group from the very beginning. They are stigmatized as worse students, probably – according to observations of school life – for the whole school period.</p> <p>The closure of many schools has resulted in the need to commute to school, which has led to spending more time away from home and more fatigue for children. Many rural schools are poorly equipped and have shortages of foreign language and IT teachers. In order to save money, extra-curricular activities in schools were also eliminated. In rural schools the teachers employed are less educated or less creative than in urban schools (the better ones went to middle schools).</p> <p>The educational reform was supposed to contribute to the popularization of secondary education in villages and an increase in the number of studying rural youth. One of the basic goals is to provide equal educational opportunities, and the new network of schools, especially middle schools, is supposed to be an opportunity mainly for rural children. The authors of the reform assume that each child, regardless of the place of residence, will go to a middle school – a well-equipped school with better prepared teaching staff and an appropriate base.</p> <p>At present there is a large disparity in the educational conditions for rural and urban youth. The situation of a rural school in comparison with an urban school is not favorable. In the regions with adverse economic situation, a weak condition of schools can be observed. Rural schools often teach split grades. Their teachers are not prepared to work in such a system.</p>

Educational system in the village	Situation of children (educational barriers)
	<p>– Low educational aspirations of children and youth from rural environments.</p> <p>Educational aspirations are another factor revealing the differences between the inhabitants of cities and villages. It is particularly visible in people over the age of 20. In the age group 20–24, 51% of rural inhabitants are willing to continue education (Palka, 2010). Although this ratio increased by 12% as compared to 2003, there is still a significant difference in the level of educational aspirations between rural inhabitants and their peers from the city. In cities – depending on their size – this ratio was respectively: 46–61% in 2003 and 54–70% in 2005 (Strategia Rozwoju Edukacji na Obszarach Wiejskich na lata 2007–2013, 2005, p. 8).</p> <p>– Difficult access to educational and cultural infrastructure.</p> <p>The number of main libraries, library points, clubs, day-care rooms and cinemas is steadily decreasing. In the last 10 years the number of non-school institutions, such as cultural centers, youth centers, inter-school sports grounds and many others, has halved.</p> <p>– Lack of common access to computers, the Internet and other multimedia aids.</p> <p>– Limited access to psycho-pedagogical support.</p> <p>– Differentiation of educational opportunities of rural children due to lack of funds for the development of education in rural areas.</p> <p>The pedagogical literature strongly emphasizes the thesis that with insufficient financial potential, instead of the expected development of education, there may be stagnation or even worse – its further regress. In such circumstances the situation of rural children will deteriorate, and educational inequalities between children in urban and rural areas will increase.</p>

Source: Matyjas 2008, pp. 195–197.

It should be added that Polish villages and rural schools are undergoing dynamic changes – positive changes, which is confirmed in the “Rural Poland 2018” report (2018, p. 2), as compared to the report for 2010. The report states that “The process of narrowing the development gaps between rural and urban areas is continuing, as illustrated by the most important indicators characterizing the level of social and economic development, as well as by the convergence of political views, educational aspirations, consumption patterns or the demographic situation for rural areas and the rest of the country”. The report also indicates that the scale of poverty in both the country and rural areas is decreasing, as is the educational gap and the extent of digital exclusion. In 2017, 75% of the rural population declared having access to the Internet in their own household, while in 2015 this ratio was 55%. There is an increase not only in the availability of access to the Internet, but also in the ability to use it for informational, educational and economic purposes.

The highlighted positives are a source of optimism as to the development, situation of the Polish village and the conditions it creates for school education.

It should be added, however, that not all factors determining the quality of schools in these environments develop equally dynamically, especially those relating to after-school education and determining self-education. The authors of the report point to the fact that rural inhabitants do not participate in culture as often as city inhabitants. This applies not only to theater, cinema or museums, but also to reading books. They are less likely to take advantage of leisure and tourist trips abroad (Raport o stanie wsi. Polska wieś 2018, p. 3). The highlighted factor is difficult to implement due to the fact that villages are located far away from big cities, where these cultural institutions are located, which is connected with the logistic organization of the trip, but mainly with finances. That is why it is so important for these local/rural environments to organize various types of cultural events, including those related to high culture. Meeting such needs of the rural population, including children/youth, and finding funds for their realization is a great advantage for the self-government authorities, non-governmental organizations functioning in rural areas. This is, by the way, what happens in many municipalities and rural schools (EU programs dedicated to education and culture).

Final thought

Rural environment has a direct impact on the school education of children, it is a “huge” socio-educational space (institutional and non-institutional) for all inhabitants, including children. It encompasses natural, social and cultural factors and includes many environmental actors such as family, school, parish, education and cultural institutions and others. These factors determine not only the course of socialization or education of children, but also their quality or level. They may create favorable or unfavorable conditions for development, upbringing or education (Matyjas 2012, p. 209). Each local (rural) environment has a number of functions: educational, recreational and creative, supportive and caring, as well as integrative and regulatory functions (Winiarski 2008, p. 173). They are implemented to a varying extent and scope, but unfortunately worse in rural environments.

Jan Papież (2006, pp. 75–76) identifies two groups of factors determining the education of children in rural environments, and thus their educational opportunities: macro- and micro-sociological factors. The first group of factors refers to the basic structural differentiation of the society as a whole (village-city, social stratification according to the economic, socio-occupational, and other criteria). The differentiation of individuals with regard to education, wealth, participation in power and cultural level that occurs in society leads

to inequalities in their access to education. This in turn results in different systems of social values, expectations, choices and different conditions for their implementation. The microsociological factors, on the other hand, consist of specific individual characteristics of people, their abilities, interests, needs or aspirations, as well as separate characteristics of narrow formal and informal groups, i.e. socialization environments such as family, peers, local community, school.

The analysis of the macro- and micro-sociological factors described above in relation to Polish villages does not create a coherent positive or negative image. The data provided earlier indicate that the sphere of rural education, in a broader context of rural environments, in spite of dynamic transformations of both, still differs from the image of urban schools and environments. Rural schools are diverse, as are rural environments, which unfortunately remain in some (although rapidly changing for the better) distance to urban environments.

The change in the school education of children in rural environments should be systemic (“top-down”) and local – taking into account the specificity of a given territory (“bottom-up” – local government, parents). It should be based on a comprehensive diagnosis of all factors determining the education of rural children, in this way defining the direction, scope and level of changes aimed at improving the quality of school and after-school education in rural areas. Only in this way can the educational opportunities of children from rural environments be improved.

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