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## **Social antecedents of personal citizenship: examining factors influencing contemporary Polish 16-year-olds' educational aspirations**

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### **Abstract**

*Even though Poland has been a democratic country for over 20 years, Polish young people do not generally seem to be very involved in aspects of civic participation. Previous research (mainly American and British) has identified education as an important vehicle for shaping personal sense of citizenship. Therefore, in our study, we focused on educational aspirations characterising those young Poles who are at the end of their compulsory education period and about to make one of their first crucial life decisions: what to do next – continue the education or finish it now? We were particularly interested in what social factors affect the level of the 16-year-olds' educational aspirations. Previous foreign research demonstrates that the most significant factors are: one's parents' educational level, family socio-economic status, and gender. Previous Polish studies, however, suggest that the relations between one's parents' education as well as family socio-economic status and educational aspirations might be negative. As for girls' higher aspirations (as compared to boys'), Polish previous data appear to be congruent with the foreign ones. The present study was thus exploratory and aimed to verify how exactly the three factors affect Polish teenagers' educational aspirations. The participants completed a questionnaire indicating: The level of their educational aspirations and what either parent's education was. Their socio-economic status was operationalised as their residence place (a city vs. a village in the north-eastern part of Poland, as in that region these two places differ fundamentally where their inhabitants' affluence level is concerned). The results, somewhat surprisingly, are in line with the American and British rather than the Polish previous data.*

**Keywords:** *education, aspirations, 16-year-olds, parents*

### **Introduction**

In our paper, personal citizenship is to be understood as personal involvement in any kind of civic activity, such as, for example, participating in elections, referenda; protesting against human rights violation or environment pollution (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz et al, 2010; cf. Kennedy, 2006; Lewicka, 2005). We are particularly concerned about personal citizenship because, even though Poland has been a democratic country for over 20 years, Polish young people do not generally seem to be very involved or indeed interested in any aspects of civic participation (Cześniak, 2007; Korkut, 2005, Regulska, 2009). However, we are also concerned with educational aspirations because previous research (mainly American and British) has identified education as an important vehicle for shaping personal sense of citizenship (Putnam,

2000; Hoskins et al, 2008; Barber, 2003; Gutmann, Thompson, 2004). Therefore, we decided to examine in our research young Poles who are at the end of their compulsory education period and about to make one of their first crucial life decisions: what to do next – continue the education or finish it now? We believed that both this decision and the level of the 16-year-olds' educational aspirations may reflect, to some extent at least, not only their maturity level, but also their personal citizenship potential as it is conceptualised by Kennedy (2006) - i.e. as a potential to develop such personal characteristics that would enhance one's taking responsibility for oneself and one's own life. We hypothesised that there should be three factors potentially most affecting the level of young Poles' educational aspirations: their parents' educational level, their residence place, and their gender.

Dubow and colleagues (Dubow et al, 2009) have demonstrated that there is a very strong, positive relation between parents' educational level and the level of educational aspirations characterising their adolescent children. As for Polish available data, however, it has been shown that having a university degree is hardly ever regarded in Poland as a life success symptom (CBOS: BS/89/2013). What is more, the quality of university education is generally not highly evaluated by most Polish graduates and generally, university education is not considered to enhance the chances to be employed (CBOS: BS/92/2013) because only those who have never studied at universities believe that university education may enhance one's professional success (CBOS: BS/96/2013).

Other researchers (e.g. Caspi et al, 1998; Sobolewski & Amato, 2005; Whitson & Keller, 2004) have demonstrated a strong, positive relation between the family socio-economic status and the level of education the children achieve when they are grown up. Note, in our research, the socio-economic status was operationalised as the residence place, i.e. a city vs. a village in the north-eastern part of Poland, as in that region these two places differ fundamentally where their inhabitants' affluence level is concerned. The available Polish data seem to contradict the international research again as they show both that the quality of university education is generally not highly evaluated by residents of larger Polish cities (CBOS: BS/92/2013) and that the opinion that university education may enhance one's professional success is typical of rural rather than urban areas (CBOS: BS/96/2013).

Gutman and colleagues (Gutman et al, 2012) as well as Mello (2008 and 2009) have all demonstrated in their research that girls have higher educational aspirations as compared to boys. In this one aspects, the Polish data appear to be congruent with those presented both by Gutman and colleagues and by Mello because they show that it is much more characteristic of women than men to believe that university education may enhance one's professional success (CBOS: BS/96/2013).

Therefore, the present study aimed to examine how the three selected factors (i.e. parents' educational level, residence place, and gender) might affect the contemporary Polish 16-year-olds' educational aspirations: whether the influence of each factor would be similar to that reported by international researchers or in accordance with the general Polish tendency.

## The empirical study

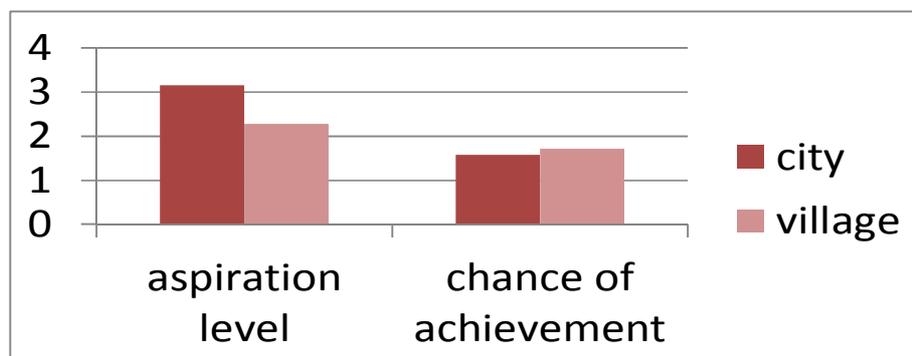
### *Participants and procedure*

The participants were ninety-five young people at the end of their compulsory education period (45 girls, 50 boys). Forty eight of the participants (23 girls, 25 boys) live and attend school in Olsztyn. The other forty-seven persons (22 girls, 25 boys) live and attend school in Lelkowo, i.e. in a village in the northern part of Poland. The participants responded to questions concerning their educational aspirations, i.e.: whether they were going to continue education and if so, at what level (0 = “I’m not going to continue”, 4 = “A-level”); the chances they thought they had to achieve what they aspired (0 = “No chance at all”, 3 = “A very good chance”); and either parent’s educational level (0 = “no education”, 3 “university education”).

### *Results*

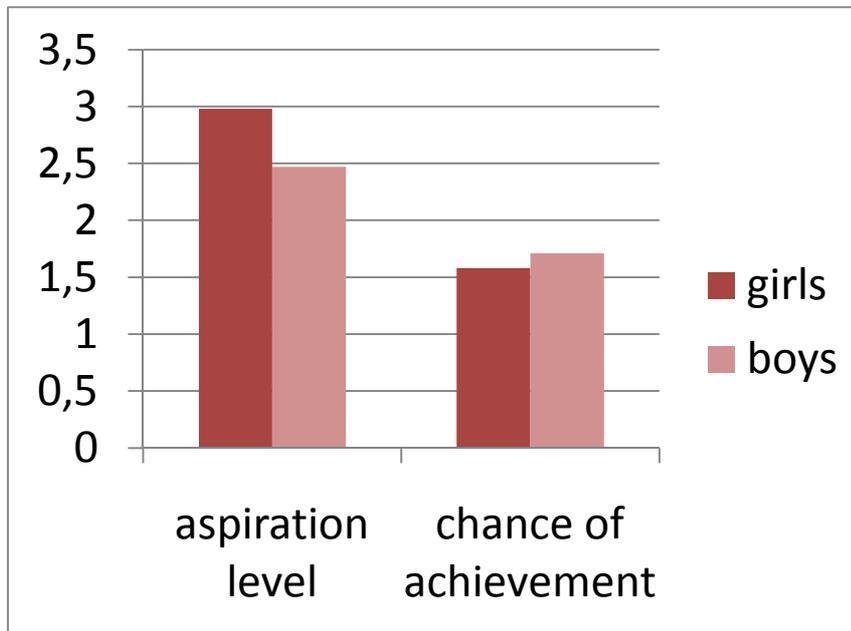
First, we conducted a regression analysis to verify if there was any relation between the participants’ educational aspirations, their subjectively perceived chance of achievement and their parents’ educational level. In the analysis, the parents’ educational level appeared to be a significant predictor of the participants’ aspiration level,  $Beta = .35, p = .001$ , but it did not appear to predict the level of the subjectively perceived chance of achievement,  $Beta ns$ . Next, an analysis of variance was conducted to check whether the participants’ residence place affected the level of their educational aspirations as well as of their subjectively perceived chance of achievement. As for the aspiration level, the analysis showed the main effect of the ‘residence place’ factor which appeared to be strong and highly significant,  $F(1, 94) = 18.06, p = .000$ . The city dwellers’ level of educational aspirations turned out to be higher ( $M = 3.15$ ) as compared to that characterising participants living in the village ( $M = 2.28$ ). Where the participants’ subjectively perceived chance of achieving their aspirations was concerned, however, there was no main effect detected of the ‘residence place’ factor (see: Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The relation between the participants’ educational aspirations, their subjectively perceived chance of achievement and their residence place**



The analysis of variance also demonstrated a significant, though not so strong, main effect of the participants' gender on the level of their educational aspirations,  $F(1, 94) = 5.78, p = .02$ . The girls appeared to have a higher aspiration level ( $M = 2.98$ ) as compared to the boys ( $M = 2.47$ ). However, once again, the subjectively perceived chance of achieving what they aspired was not significantly affected by the examined factor (i.e. the participants' gender) as both the girls and the boys perceived their chance at virtually the same level (see: Figure 2).

**Figure 2. The relation between the participants' educational aspirations, their subjectively perceived chance of achievement and their gender**



### Summary

Our research and its present results mainly corroborate the tendencies observed previously abroad rather than in Poland because, as it has been demonstrated, parents' educational level seems to affect positively their children's level of educational aspirations. Indeed, the higher the participants' parents' educational level, the higher were their own educational aspirations. What we also found was that higher educational aspirations characterised the city rather than the village residents, and the girls rather than the boys. As for the subjectively perceived chances of achieving what the young people aspire, however, it turned out that neither their parents' educational level, nor the participants' residence place or their gender affected the usually low level of the (subjectively perceived) achievement chance.

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