

# Contemporary Conditions of Regional Education of Children and Youth in Poland: a Sociological Perspective

## Współczesne uwarunkowania edukacji regionalnej dzieci i młodzieży w Polsce – perspektywa socjologiczna

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**Abstract:** The inspiration for this study comes from a long-standing discussion among teachers, educators, cultural workers and regionalists about the presence of regional issues in the education system, as well as its goals and functions in the context of educating and raising children and youth. The aim of the study was to show the most important areas of contemporary conditions of regional education, and thus its role in the education of children and youth. A desk research analysis was conducted, covering the most important sources from the academic literature as well as existing data. The basic assumptions of regional education were presented, as well as its importance for the individual and the local community in the context of shaping knowledge about the region and the sense of belonging to a “small homeland” among children and young people. The rest of the text attempts to characterize three key areas covering the determinants of contemporary regional education: 1) globalization processes and their role in shaping identity; 2) legal regulations and the role of the teacher in providing children and young people with knowledge about the region, and 3) available opportunities to implement regional content in primary schools.

**Keywords:** regional education, children and youth, regionalism, “small homeland,” local community, sociology of education, sociology of culture

**Abstrakt:** Inspiracją dla niniejszego opracowania jest tocząca się od lat dyskusja wśród nauczycieli, pedagogów, pracowników kultury i regionalistów na temat obecności problematyki regionalnej w systemie oświaty, jej celów i funkcji, jakie spełnia w kontekście edukacji i wychowania dzieci i młodzieży. Celem opracowania było ukazanie najważniejszych obszarów współczesnych uwarunkowań edukacji regionalnej, a tym samym jej roli w systemie edukacji dzieci i młodzieży. Przeprowadzono analizę desk research, obejmującą najważniejsze źródła z zakresu literatury przedmiotu oraz dane zastane. Przedstawiono podstawowe założenia edukacji regionalnej, jej znaczenie dla jednostki i wspólnoty lokalnej w kontekście kształtowania wiedzy o regionie, poczucia przynależności do „małej ojczyzny” u dzieci i młodzieży. W dalszej części tekstu podjęto próbę scharakteryzowania trzech kluczowych obszarów obejmujących determinanty współczesnej edukacji regionalnej: 1) procesy globalizacji i ich rola w procesie kształtowania tożsamości; 2) uregulowania prawne i rola nauczyciela w przekazywaniu dzieciom i młodzieży wiedzy o regionie oraz 3) dostępne możliwości realizacji treści regionalnych w szkole.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja regionalna, dzieci i młodzież, regionalizm, „mała ojczyzna”, wspólnota lokalna, socjologia edukacji, socjologia kultury



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## INTRODUCTION – ON THE NEED FOR REGIONAL EDUCATION

The issue of regional education has been discussed by academic teachers, primary school teachers, educators, cultural workers, and regional scholars. Most members of these professions would agree that there is insufficient presence of regional content in the education system. Currently, teaching regional education presents big challenges. The youngest generation, while searching for their own identity, experiences profound social changes, globalization, and the influence of mass culture. An additional problem is that there is no appropriate legal framework specifying the role of regional education in the education system. However, one can identify numerous attractive and diverse educational methods and tools that can be used to teach about regional topics. This situation encourages reflection on the condition of regional education and its development prospects in contemporary schools.

Scholarly literature identifies numerous approaches and theories of regional education; yet, as already noticed by P. Petrykowski, the theoretical approaches do not analyze regional education comprehensively. In this regard, one can identify many perspectives, such as:

- Treating regional education as a component of general education;
- Gaining regional competence;
- Regional education focused on the region's cultural heritage;
- Regional education as a task of the local school;
- Regional education understood as learning, strengthening, and raising awareness (Petrykowski 2003).

From the sociological perspective, regional education can be defined, following J. Nikitorowicz, as acquisition of knowledge about the region. Regional education allows one to understand oneself and the local culture, but at the same time shapes a young person's sense of self-identity and lays the foundation for openness and tolerance. This way it encourages, without rejecting one's foundational values, adoption of a new culture, environment, language, ways of communicating, and adjusting to otherness (Nikitorowicz 2011, 23-27).

The main goals of regional education, according to H. Skorowski, include raising awareness about the value of the region's heritage and strengthening the connection between the people and their immediate surroundings (Skorowski 1998/1999, 256). The detailed goals of regional education include:

- Equipping the student with detailed knowledge about the region;
- Identifying the region's multiple values (material and intangible) during the education process;
- Preparing the student to identify with the aforementioned values;
- Developing the so-called "pluralistic identity;"
- Developing a sense of identity based both on the involvement in the local community and openness to other communities and cultures (Skorowski 1998/1999, 257).

B. Synak defines the goals of regional education in a similar way. He lists its following functions: creating a sense of group identity, teaching tolerance towards other communities, integrating people from different regions, preparing for life in the national homeland, spurring local and national patriotism, strengthening the civil society and the democratic order, developing a sense of responsibility for the national and local homelands, and creating a sense of responsibility for the others' well-being (Synak 2000). Similarly, M. Szczepański emphasized the importance of regional education throughout schooling and upbringing. In the 1990s, he argued that there was a need to launch an interdisciplinary subject under a proposed name "Local Homeland," which, according to the author, should teach about the following:

- Microecology, i.e. study of the local/regional natural environment and ecological development opportunities;
- Microgeography, i.e. study of the local/regional topography;
- Regional history, i.e. study of local/regional events, important historical figures, and political institutions;
- Regional sociology, i.e. study of the local/regional community and the necessary civilizational transformations of the region;
- Local dialects;
- Local/regional literature;
- Region's material culture (urban planning, architecture), art (music, painting, sculpture), and crafts (Szczepański 1996).

Scientific research on regional education focuses on at least several areas and provides knowledge about various dimensions of implementing regional education. These studies are conducted using both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. In academic literature, one can find texts dedicated to students' perspectives and their perceptions regarding the presence of regional education content in schools, the teaching methods used, and the sources of knowledge about the region (Szwarc 2022). Numerous studies have also been conducted among teachers and pedagogy students, which reveals attitudes toward regional education in schools, opinions on the possibility of implementing regional content at different stages of education, related difficulties, and suggestions for changes in the education system (Dworska 2016; Dworska-Kaczmarczyk and Kraszewski 2020). An important part of the academic output in this field also includes studies that relate the issue of regional education to a broader social context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Lisowska 2022), or the conditions of a specific regional/local community (Rusek 2017).

The theoretical approaches to regional education discussed above only partially address this aspect of education. At the same time, they show that the topic, given its role in the public education system, requires a multidimensional approach. This is consistent with the increasingly frequent question about the essence of human development and the educational institutions serving the people. The remaining part of the study will cover the three most important areas of implementation and development of regional education, listing the factors affecting the latter.

## 1. GLOBALIZATION AND REGIONAL EDUCATION

As Andrzej Majer emphasizes, “an inherent feature of globalization is participation in the local systems; therefore both dimensions (local and global) require mutual analysis, description and interpretation” (Majer 2011, 27). Without a doubt, globalization has its economic, political, social and cultural aspects. They manifest themselves through worldwide intensification of social relations and increasing integration of the world economy (Misiak 2007, 10). The end result is the creation of a global market in which the essential role is played not by the state with its political and fiscal borders, but by free flow of money, goods and labor (Misiak 2007, 11). Globalization also manifests itself through mutual exchange and influence of various cultures, which transpire through migration, trade, and the exchange of information (Błachnio 2007, 151). As M. S. Szczepański and K. Krzysztofek note, globalization “changes the understanding of the nation and the nature of nation-building factors. The latter include the culture (affected by the pressure of the global culture), the domestic market (subjected to the internationalization of the economy), the territory (affected by the decreasing saliency of international borders), and the state (undermined due to the declining role of sovereignty)” (Krzysztofek and Szczepański 2005, 247).

Many researchers emphasize that although globalization is often perceived from a large-system perspective (on a macro scale), it does not proceed in some other dimension, but instead affects the daily life of every individual and community (Szpunar 2006, 172). Hence, globalization remains closely associated with the micro (local) and meso levels. The local, often contrasted with the global, encompasses such notions as the community (in the understanding of Ferdinand Tönnies), a place, the region, the local community, and the local system (Majer 2011, 29). Localness can be perceived as a set of norms and values emphasizing the subjectivity of local communities and advocating for decentralization and development of self-government (Majer 2011, 29). As A. Majer points out, localness “features directness and spontaneity of mutual contacts, which come out from a sense of familiarity. (...) Localness is a form of fulfillment of communities occupying a permanent territorial base, a way of settling them down in space” (Majer 2011, 29). A specific territory, and even more so a “domesticated” or “tamed” place, are therefore constitutive elements of localness. As M. Kranz-Szurek points out, “localness is understood primarily in terms of a location in space or assignment to a particular place. Such a place constitutes a distinct enclave of cultural and social particularism, defines the scope of life experiences, and is crucial during the process of identity creation” (Kranz-Szurek 2012, 13).

Taking into account relations between various aspects of social reality, it is necessary to identify the consequences of globalization, which can be observed at all levels and perspectives: regional, local, group, and individual. At the global level, several fundamental manifestations of globalization can be observed, including the technology-enabled changes leading to the development of information society.

Development of communication technologies and shrinking of space and time have led to the emergence of a single global market (Wielecki 2004, 10-11). As K. Wielecki emphasizes, “cyberspace delimits the boundaries of a new global and unrestricted market in which small and medium-sized countries are too weak to be considered players of any importance.” Therefore, functions of the nation state are also subject to change. Its borders, as well as the associated social, political, and economic arrangements have all been seriously undermined (Wielecki 2004, 11).

From the regional and local points of view, globalization weakens the importance of territoriality as it increases the political and cultural importance of regions. In the economic sphere, it brings about the necessity to meet the requirements of competitiveness and innovation (through cooperation with transnational corporations). In the social sphere, it makes the consumer lifestyle more popular (Sala 2008).

Undoubtedly, there are many effects of globalization that may be considered negative, such as the collapse of all civilizations into a single world civilization, erosion of civil society, and weakening of the nation state. Simultaneously, one can observe uncontrolled expansion of transnational corporations, destruction of social solidarity at the domestic and international levels, and finally, growth of transnational social pathologies (e.g. crime). Globalization brings about other consequences that may be deemed negative, such as growing instability caused by deepening social inequalities and increasing migrations. Some communities face social exclusion, which brings about dangers of rising fundamentalism, nationalism, and separatism (Krzysztofek and Szczepański 2005, 289). Moreover, globalization affects moral codes and identities through selective promotion of values by the global culture, increasing secularization and exclusion of religious discourses, fostering consumption-focused attitudes, promotion of the “citizen of the world” identity, and ongoing cultural unification that weakens a sense of ethnic belonging (Błachnio 2007, 155-156; Tureczek 2020).

On the other hand, there are many positive effects of globalization. Such observable or measurable effects include economic growth, increasing market efficiency, elimination of trade barriers and promotion of competitiveness, diffusion of development factors, growing tolerance, increasingly non-ideological character of the global economy, universalization of human rights, and adoption of supranational legal regulations (Krzysztofek and Szczepański 2005, 283-284; Tureczek 2020).

All these manifestations and consequences of globalization directly affect the process of education. Given this, an important question regarding the role of educational institutions was raised by J. Nikitorowicz, who wondered “how to educate children, youth, and adults in order to persist as a nation and a state belonging to the European structures that have for centuries been shaped by Judaism, Christianity, Greek philosophy and the Roman law, in a way that enables preservation of our own patterns, principles, traditions, and values? Yet, how to educate so that to simultaneously participate in an active dialogue with other

nations, but without culturally disappearing in the global world?” (Nikitorowicz 2019, 21-22). Therefore, given a variety of options offered by mass culture and persistent Internet use, may young people find regional content interesting? As J. Nikitorowicz points out, “surrounded by mass culture and actively participating in the global life over the Internet, most students are often unwilling to become involved in the activities of the local community. Sometimes, they perceive regional education as uninteresting or simply do not have time for it. But when students are shown that regionalism is supposed to help them develop local patriotism, and thus a feeling of being at home, of being settled and rooted, then it will turn out that, surrounded by attractions of the global world, a student will still develop a positive attitude towards fundamental homeland values such as the native language, rootedness in a territory, historical genealogy, as well as traditions, customs, rules and norms of behavior of the private homeland” (Nikitorowicz 2006, 102).

Additionally, a subjective sense of belonging and familiarity with the region and its uniqueness may bring numerous benefits during interaction with people from other cultures. M. Kranz-Szurek rightly notes that “the global context means that some people only now can become familiar with other cultures, and then, using global tools, they can learn more about them, thus developing attitudes of tolerance and openness” (Kranz-Szurek 2012, 18). Regional education makes it possible to understand the surrounding world. Learning about the immediate surroundings is one of the ways to learn about the national and universal human cultures (Kempiński 2016). Hence, school-led regional education can be considered both an opportunity and a challenge. Its implementation is impossible without appropriate educational regulations and an attractive teaching offer. The subsequent part of the article is devoted to these topics.

## 2. PLACING REGIONAL EDUCATION WITHIN THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE POLISH NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

The issue of regional education is closely related to the development of the core curriculum and guidelines of the Ministry of Science and Education of Poland. Undoubtedly, the question of legal framework for regional education was already considered in the early 1990s, but it has since evolved along with subsequent education reforms and changes in core curricula. Following a reflection on the need to include regional content as an element of education system and children upbringing, the Ministry of Education adopted in 1995 a report “Cultural Heritage in the Region. Program Assumptions” (Skorowski 1998/1999). The document “applied a pedagogical approach that emphasized the instructional and educational importance of local cultural heritage for integral human development. Its student-oriented goals included increasing knowledge and affection for the local homeland and thus helping students become active and creative future citizens” (Arkabus 2018, 100).

The 1999 core curriculum implemented regional education at all stages of schooling, but at each stage it was to be taught differently depending on the age



group (e.g. inter-curricular path was used in grades IV-VI and junior high school). At the first stage, children learned about and engaged in the activities such as:

- Home; a child as a family member;
- The relationship between school and the child as a student, classmate, friend;
- The town and life of its inhabitants;
- Natural world in the immediate surroundings;
- Listening to fairy tales, short stories and legends, including those from the region, to inspire students' creativity and content creation;
- Creation of art inspired by regional traditions using a variety of materials, techniques, and forms;
- Diversity of cultural heritage and exploration (Arkabus 2018, 102; Józefowicz 2013).

The next stage of learning (grades IV-VI) included the following topics:

- My orientation towards others (camaraderie, friendship, love);
- Me and the others – role models – selected historical and contemporary figures;
- My home, family and neighborhood;
- Society; civil rights and obligations;
- Work and its importance in the individual and social life;
- Poland's regional diversity;
- Living conditions in the region and the way they are shaped by natural and anthropogenic factors; surrounding landscape (Arkabus 2018, 102-103; Józefowicz 2013).

At junior high school, regional education was included under a topical framework "Regional Education – Cultural Heritage in the Region" (Arkabus 2018, 103; Józefowicz 2013).

In the next core curriculum, adopted in 2008, regional content was incorporated into various school subjects, which analyzed it from the regional, national, and international perspectives. As A. Józefowicz emphasized, "fundamental changes could be noticed at the first stage of education as children attending the initial grades of primary school were in fact familiarized with the knowledge about their immediate surroundings. However, little changed at the second stage, and in fact, regional topics were almost negligible. More regional content was taught at the third and fourth stages, and that despite the fact that from the early years a young person should learn about their closest surroundings and develop their identity..." (Józefowicz 2013, 116). D. Konieczka-Śliwińska, who made a detailed analysis of both core curricula, expressed a similar opinion. She concluded that "what clearly distinguishes the new concept of regional education from the one implemented in 1999–2009 is a stronger emphasis on the practically-oriented preparation for activity in local and regional settings" (Konieczka-Śliwińska 2015, 319). Moreover, "the focus switched from development of regional identity to the formation of a bond with local communities, which was perhaps a less ambitious, but also

a more achievable goal. There was a greater emphasis on broadly understood cultural participation and on establishment of a clear connection between the regionalist idea and patriotic and civic education” (Konieczka-Śliwińska 2015, 319). Already then, D. Konieczka-Śliwińska added a valuable observation about the possible consequences of this state of affairs. She was concerned about gradual marginalization of teaching of regional topics at schools and that this task was taken over by cultural institutions, associations, and local government bodies (Konieczka-Śliwińska 2015, 319).

In the currently applicable core curriculum for primary school general education, outlined in the directive of the Ministry of Education of Poland from 14 February 2017, regional content was incorporated into general education subjects (Arkabus 2018). Marginalization of regional education has therefore remained a problem and is even deepening, given the increasing presence of regional topics in various extracurricular forms of education. Additionally, it should be emphasized that the teacher and the choice of pedagogical tools, used both in schools and during extracurricular activities, play the most important part in the promotion of regional education. Arousing interest in regional matters among children and youths and shaping pro-regional attitudes depend first of all on the teacher’s passion and commitment (Kempiński 2016).

### 3. TOOLS AND METHODS OF IMPLEMENTING REGIONAL CONTENT AT SCHOOL

Despite consecutive systemic changes in the education sector that led to the decreasing presence of regional content in schools, one can still point out numerous diverse educational methods and tools that can be successfully used to implement regional education. Undoubtedly, a crucial role is played by the teacher. As Ł. Kempieński emphasizes, “effectiveness of education in the spirit of regionalism largely depends on the teacher’s knowledge, personal attitude to the subject, and the passion enabling him to ‘infect’ students with the interest in regionalism” and “committed regionalists are the driving force of regional education” (Kempiński 2016, 81-82). Nevertheless, appropriate preparation, skills, and commitment make effective teaching of regional education possible, regardless of whether a teacher is someone rooted in and fascinated by the region or somebody who moved in relatively recently and is not embedded in the regional culture.

One of the available forms of education are extracurricular and out-of-school activities, during which students can make good use of free time and develop interests. As J. Sacharczuk and A. Szwarc emphasize, extracurricular activities “are an excellent opportunity to familiarize oneself with and promote the local homeland, but also to introduce students to the culture of other regions of Poland and other countries” (Sacharczuk and Szwarc 2019, 255). Such activities may be organized by different kinds of clubs (regional, travel, sightseeing, geographical, historical, European, or foreign language) or applied during extracurricular artistic activities (music, art, or theater). Promotion of regional content may also



be facilitated by the student government or scouting troops (Sacharczuk and Szwarc 2019, 255). Regular school classes may be complemented with workshops and competitions with a regional focus.

It is also worth analyzing the role of school-organized after-school programs, which are used both to provide childcare and education. Their main goal is to support the latter, but they also help the school in children's upbringing (meeting basic needs) and perform therapeutic and preventive roles (i.e. shaping the appropriate patterns of behavior). Certainly, after-school programs could be successfully used to implement initiatives in the field of regional education. However, this would require that the school and staff of after-school programs undertake certain systemic actions regarding the recognition of students' educational needs and interests, which could form the basis for organization of classes at such programs (Sacharczuk and Szwarc, 2019).

An important way to implement regional education is also a school trip. According to L. Pawelec, educational school trips might cover a variety of sights, such as indoor or open-air museums, churches, parks, nature preserves, monuments, memorial centers, cultural centers, libraries, folk exhibitions, or theaters. Such trips may also be organized around places associated with the life and activity of outstanding regional figures from the worlds of literature, art, music, history, politics, etc. Alternatively, during school trips students may be asked to meet and interview people involved in the protection and creation of cultural heritage, artists (including folk artists), and craftsmen. They may also be asked to collect various cultural items of material and spiritual significance related to the region: everyday objects, proverbs, legends, etc. To have a higher educational value, a school trip may be organized by a regional club (Pawelec 2008).

A school trip is an educational tool that allows for faster learning and more effective memorization of facts, which can be compared with textbook knowledge. It also enables direct experience and learning about the local environment; "it is a lesson in observing, listening, thinking, speaking, experiencing, and discovering; therefore, when participating in it, students learn about other people's lives, admire beauty of the local landscape, discover secrets of nature, satisfy natural cognitive curiosity, and develop interests" (Pawelec 2008, 74).

The project method is an innovative tool that can be used to creatively develop regional education curriculum. Its advantage compared to other teaching tools is that it requires students to be active, leaving a lot of space for independent activity. According to M. Szymański, the project method is characterized by interdisciplinarity (completing a task requires independent mastery of knowledge of numerous subjects), progressivist role of the teacher (the teacher acts as a moderator and advisor, helps students, gives advice and clarifies), comprehensiveness (using a broader approach than during traditional classes to analyze the topic), and non-traditional assessments (assessing student performance during group activities) (Szymański 2010). The project is a valuable tool because it requires students to participate at every stage of its implementation: when choosing a topic, finding content, making group decisions,

defining group goals, choosing the form and method of project development, result presentation, and evaluation (Sacharczuk and Szwarc 2019).

## CONCLUSION

This reflection on regional education in contemporary schools leads to the conclusion that the issue is complex and multidimensional. Implementation of regional education depends on a number of factors that play out at the micro (individual), meso (group, community) and macro (global) levels. These are likely the most important factors influencing the condition of regional education:

- Globalization, which includes numerous phenomena such as identity formation, search for roots, and developing reference points towards other social groups;
- Legal framework, which determines the place of regional education in the education system and possibilities of implementing regional content at school;
- Modern educational tools that can make regional topics more attractive.

This introductory analysis allows us to conclude that regional education is present in the core curricula at each stage of education, but its implementation suffers from a lack of systemic approach and disassociation between legal provisions and the educational practice. Curricula should be designed so that a teacher can teach regional content in an attractive way. There are a variety of effective methods enabling accomplishment of teaching goals of regional education, including developing a sense of connection with the region, a sense of belonging to the local homeland, and increased involvement in local issues. Certainly, regional education could benefit from a comprehensive vision that would take into account contemporary social changes, technological progress, and innovative teaching methods.

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