

EVALUATION OF THE PROSPECTS OF EDUCATIONAL AVAILABILITY IN LITHUANIAN DISTRICTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY'S TERRITORIES

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Abstract. *Scientists, national politicians and specialists from Lithuania and other countries identified the main determinants of the social development of the territories of Lithuania, the problems of the society, which have been influenced by this development, and possible trends of change. Although the social development of Lithuanian territories is determined by a “bundle” of social problems, the focus of the article is on those that may affect the availability of education in the most sparsely populated districts of Lithuania. The aim of this article is to reveal the prospects of education availability in the most sparsely populated areas of Lithuania in the context of the social development of the country's territories. The main problem question related to this is what prospects for the availability of education in the most sparsely populated areas of the country presuppose the social development of Lithuania's territories. In order to achieve the aim of the article, the design of the research was based on the theoretical analysis of the problem raised and a secondary analysis of the data in the field. The main findings of the research reflect the situation in the field of study, and the conclusions of the research drawn on the basis of them provide an assessment of the prospects of education accessibility in the most sparsely populated areas of Lithuania.*

Keywords: *welfare state, social policy, social justice, social development of territories, sparsely populated areas, accessibility of education.*

Introduction

The analysis of the scientific research of Lithuanian and foreign scientists revealed the rapid decrease in the number of inhabitants in Lithuania, simultaneously having a growing number of the elderly people in this population, and social development of the territories is noticeable with some of them turning into sparsely or the most sparsely populated areas (SPA). According to the researchers, sparsely populated areas are those where the density of the rural population does not exceed 12.5 inhabitants / km², while in the most sparsely populated areas the population density is less than 7.5 inhabitants / km² (Kriaučiūnas, E. & Daugirdas, V., 2013). Therefore, in these territories, villages

disappear every year, many of them become villages without inhabitants, while at the same time the number of educational institutions of various levels decreases. Therefore, there is a very urgent problem of the access to education, ranging from general education to higher education. This substantiates the relevance of this article, the essence of which is expressed by the problem question: what are the prospects for the availability of education in the most sparsely populated areas of Lithuania as determined by the social development of the country's territories? The main aim of the article was to reveal the prospects of accessibility of education in the most sparsely populated areas of Lithuania in the context of the social development of the country's territories. To achieve the aim, the following objectives were addressed: to reveal the links between the accessibility of education and the social development of Lithuania's territories on the basis of theoretical analysis; to justify the links between the accessibility of education and the social development of the districts of Lithuania based on the results of statistical analysis. The relevance of the topic is related to the search for links between the accessibility of education and the social development of the territories of Lithuania, because the analysis of scientific works revealed the insufficiency of such research, as mainly only separate fields of the research topic were analyzed. The main research methods are the analysis of the scientific literature and secondary data analysis.

Theoretical Insights on the Links between Education Accessibility and Social Development in the Territories of Lithuania

In order to reveal the first objective of the article, the chosen strategy is to provide scientific research on the main topic and sub-themes.

The first important aspect of the theoretical analysis is the concept of accessibility of education. It is becoming commonplace in Lithuania to look at the educational organization as an organization providing educational and social services. Therefore, educational institutions should provide quality services that meet the needs and expectations of the users, i.e. children and parents, and gain their trust. (Trakšelys & Martišauskienė, 2016). Based on the scientific analysis, it can be argued that a large number of researchers associate the availability of education with social justice. According to Trakšelys (2015), research literature and studies usually focus on the physical accessibility of the school as the main aspect of access to education when the economic and social aspects of education are under-researched. It relates to social justice as the fundamental human right. According to Leonavičius (1993 p. 230), social justice can be presented as a normative notion describing the social situation as proper, corresponding to the essence and rights of a person. From the Bieliauskaitė's point of view (2009), in the context of primary equality, when the society distributes the general resources,

a person must be entitled to a share of the resources corresponding to his motivated lifestyle choice. The employment of this insight into education can lead to the assumption that the state should provide support to those members of the society who are motivated to seek knowledge, professional competence or research capacities in relevant educational and scientific institutions. Access to education is closely linked to the structural and institutional delivery of education, depending on the different forms of organization of education systems in general and the specific organizational arrangements in schools and other institutions. Therefore, discussing the issue of accessibility to education, one of the most important aspects is related to the social inequalities and disadvantages that the education system sustains or mitigates (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2015). Comparing the experience of welfare states in evaluating the implementation of the social justice principle in education in Sweden, Scotland, and Germany, Aidukaitė (2010) observes that while the EU requires to comply to the same requirements for the education system, the member states bring specific national education goals, because the level of the development of countries (welfare) determines the peculiarities of organizing social policy and education system. This insight of the author can also be applied to Lithuania. *In summary it can be stated that access to education is usually understood as access to the state-provided education services. Their availability for service users (mostly children of school age) in the course of economic and social development of the territories can be problematic.*

The second aspect of theoretical analysis is the availability of education in the context of a welfare state mission. Accessibility of education can be related to the state's obligations to its citizens, while maintaining a certain minimum level of prosperity, and such states are perceived as welfare states (Aidukaitė et al., 2012: p. 16). Despite the fact that the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania establishes the obligations of the state for its citizens on the issues of learning and studying in various formal education institutions, the discussions in the public space and the works of scientists reveal transformations in the education system that presuppose the need for reforms (Luobikienė, 2016). Without focusing on a comprehensive analysis of the welfare state's concept and its change, this particular research is limited to the works of those authors who best fit the subject of this article and help to understand the content of the key terms and the context of the phenomenon under consideration. Hega & Hokenmaier (2002) highlighted the links between social and educational policies in advanced industrial societies, and this approach can be important in interpreting the accessibility of education not only in the context of social development of territories, but also in the context of social policy measures. Smalskys (2005), who presented a critical attitude to the problems of welfare state and the most suitable reforms of the social policy subsystems, noted that the implementation of social

policy is often linked to districtal policy, as districtal policy mainly includes policies for the development of small businesses and medium-sized enterprises, and job creation which is the basis of social policy. As regards the relation to the topic of the article, it can be argued that creating equal opportunities for all the regions would facilitate their social infrastructure development and improve the accessibility of education in the districts. Sonda (2014), presenting the conception of the welfare state and the creation of a state of modern welfare on the basis of Scandinavian welfare states, states that the international economic crisis has become the cause of the Scandinavian welfare states crisis and the cause of transformation, because the costly social welfare has exacerbated the effects of the crisis and hindered economic development, and eventually their recovery. The significance and relevance of social policy is particularly evident in the current period of observing the adverse demographic and economic changes that are characteristic of both Lithuania and other EU member states, such as declining birth rates, rising retirement age population, increasing numbers of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, either individual or group, the rate of unemployment, and the extent of emigration (Davulis, 2012). Guogis (2004), based on the analysis of the preconditions for the formation of social inequality in the Baltic States, stated that the forms of social security of the Baltic States were sufficient and institutional progress was evident in them, but there was a great lack of content. This insight leads to the presupposition that social exclusion remains a major problem in Lithuania, and this may be one of the prerequisites for non-availability of education in remote rural areas. *To sum up, it can be argued that the analysis of the research work of the welfare state has highlighted the rigidity of social policy as a public policy field, and this may affect the problems of access to education in sparsely inhabited districts of Lithuania.*

Another important area of theoretical analysis of the article is the social development of the territories and their turning into sparsely inhabited. It is worth noting that Lithuanian scientists are investigating not only the issues of the current Lithuanian territory, but also the differences in the territorial distribution of eastern and western Lithuania in the Middle and Late Centuries, as well as the development of the territory of Lithuania in the 1st – 12th centuries (Tučas, 2008). The issues of social development of territories were also interesting for the scientists in the Soviet period. Ragalevičius (1966: pp. 5-6), when exploring the tendencies of urban development, saw the impact of the demographic situation of Lithuania on migration of people from villages to cities. According to this scientist, if in 1939 in Lithuanian cities lived 23 % of the population of the country, then in 1965 their population grew to 44.3 %. Predicting the result of the development of the territories and the population of the country's cities and villages, Ragalevičius (1966: pp.) argued that, after several decades, the displacement of the country's population from rural to urban areas would increase

(in cities living up to 60 % of the country's population) as a result of the industrial concentration in cities and the rise of mechanization in villages. Kriauciūnas (2013), analysing the peculiarities of the change in the network of rural settlements in Lithuania during the period of 1989 – 2011, determined that there was a necessity to form a national political, economic, social, etc. set of measures that would regulate the further development of the rural settlements in the territorial network, as that led to inefficient use of finance of the state's and self-government institutions, social exclusion among the population, and the formation of unattractive rural areas. By examining the social development of contemporary Lithuanian territories, Lithuanian scientists regard it as a permanent process, which is inseparable from social welfare, that is a conglomerate of different indicators in society, which helps to achieve a more complete and more spiritually, socially, economically well-equipped life (Šabanovas & Gruževskis, 2014; Šabanovas, 2016). It can also be linked to education-friendly districts, making them accessible to all groups of the population, and in particular to children and young people. Sparsely populated territories (areas) are formed on the basis of socio-economic development of the districts. According to Kriauciūnas and Daugirdas (2013), in such areas the rural population density does not exceed 12.5 inhabitants / km², and in the most sparsely populated areas the population density is less than 7.5 inhabitants / km². Daugirdas et al. (2003) revealed that the socio-economic status of SPA, and in particular its outlook, is strongly influenced by the high population aging processes, in some SPA subdivisions in 2003 the working-age population represented just one-third of the people living there. Scientists have observed another significant problem of SPA, i.e. the disappearance of social institutions in the network, which results in the gradual closure of social and cultural institutions (libraries, schools, medical centers, etc.), that simultaneously reduces the level of their services (Daugirdas et al., 2003). Daugirdas & Baubinas (2008) found that the problem of SPA was probably the aging population: at the time of the analysis in the sparsely populated areas the population of the retirement age was about 30 %, and the number of children under the age of 15 was slightly over 14 %, and in some areas (Marcinkonys, Labanoras, etc.) children made up only 6 % of the inhabitants of the territories. This suggests that children living in these areas are forced to look for schools in other areas. The research works of Kriauciūnas & Daugirdas (2013) and Kriauciūnas, et al. (2014) are important for further analysis of the development of the network of sparsely inhabited Lithuanian areas and its links with the availability of education in such areas. Their research works enrich the results of the previous research on the development of SPA and the trends of potential change. An important finding is that the SPA network is rapidly expanding in Lithuania, and in comparison with 2001, when such areas occupied about 28 % of the territory of the country, in 2011 the network of the most sparsely

inhabited areas in Lithuania grew to 45 % (Kriaučiūnas & Daugirdas, 2013). The research of Kriaučiūnas, et al. (2014) revealed that in the outlying peripheral Lithuanian municipalities the decline in the population of most rural settlements was more intense than in more densely populated areas. From the point of view of these scholars, the result of the territorial redistribution of rural residents taking place in Lithuania is the concentration of people closer to the cities, which has led the Lithuanian economy to become more “urban”. In the aspect of access to education in sparsely populated areas there is an important fact that the more sparsely populated the area is, the greater the proportion of rural population in that category live in smaller villages. For example, villages with more than 500 inhabitants cover only 10.5 % of the SPA population, while in densely populated areas about 39 % of the population lives in such settlements. In the aspect of the development of territories, individual case studies, which highlight their specificity, are important. Such as the Butkutė's (2013) study, which revealed the uniqueness of the Labanor subdistrict, whose settlements are located in wooded areas.

The analysis of the scientific literature research has created the preconditions for the assertion that the growing tendencies of the development of the territories of Lithuania, i.e. the development of rural areas into the sparsely / most sparsely populated areas and the decline of general education schools, may raise more and more difficulties in meeting the educational needs of children in these areas. Therefore, the problem of access to education of children living in the sparsely populated areas of Lithuania is becoming more and more relevant.

Justification of the links between education accessibility and socio-economic development of Lithuanian territories with statistical data

Research organization and sources. In order to support the link between education accessibility and socio-economic development in the territories of Lithuania on the basis of statistical data, the following logical sequence of research organization was chosen: the **comparison** of the number of general education schools and pupils in the counties of Lithuania in the period of 2012 – 2013 and 2016 – 2017; the **determination** of the municipalities in which the population density of inhabitants / km² at the beginning of 2017 was the sparsest by county; the **selection** of the most sparsely inhabited areas with the status of the administrative center in those municipalities, indicating the percentage of the inhabitants of the subdistrict living in the area in percent; the **determination** whether there is a general education school in the area and its previous status. The main research method is secondary data analysis. The limitation of the research is due to the fact that not all the most recent research data is available. Also, despite the fact that access to education is relevant not only to children of school age, the

availability of higher education in this article is not directly addressed due to the restructuring of the network of higher education. Data sources are the data from the Department of Statistics of the Republic of Lithuania, i.e. the Results of the 2011 Population and Housing Census of the Republic of Lithuania, and the data from later years, according to the individual indicators of the groups, the data of the researchers who studied the peculiarities of the settlement network of the most sparsely populated Lithuanian territories (Kriaučiūnas & Daugirdas, 2013).

Research results and their analysis. According to the data of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics since 2012 the number of general schools and pupils has been decreasing annually in Lithuania. In 2016 – 2017, compared to 2012 – 2013, the number of general education schools in Lithuania decreased from 1242 to 1151, i.e. by 91 school, and the number of pupils in the corresponding period decreased from 373 874 to 330 869, i.e. by 43 005 pupils. The number of schools has decreased in all counties, but most of all this is felt in the counties where the number of schools has decreased by more than 10 %: Tauragė (decreased by more than 16 %), Utena (decreased by 13 %) and Šiauliai (decreased by 11 %) counties, whereas the number of schools in the Vilnius county decreased by only 2 %. In the analyzed period, the decrease in the number of general school pupils in the counties is evidenced by the following figures: pupils in Tauragė and Utena counties dropped by about one fifth, while in Alytus, Marijampolė, Panevėžys and Telšiai counties by about 18 %, in Šiauliai county by 17 %, and Kaunas by more than 11 %. The number of pupils grew only in Vilnius county (by 1.7 %), while in Klaipėda county, although during the analyzed period the number of pupils decreased by almost 8 %, but a slight increase in the number of pupils was observed: in 2016 – 2017, in comparison with the previous school year, the number of pupils in this county increased by 48 pupils.

In carrying out the research plan, on the ground of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics data about resident population, area and population density, 13 municipalities of 7 Lithuanian counties were selected for further analysis, in which the population density in 2017 at the beginning of the year did not exceed 25 inhabitants / km², as well as 19 administrative centres of the most sparsely populated among them: 1 area in Alytus county – Varėna district municipality, in Telšiai county – Rietavas district municipality, in Panevėžys county – Rokiškis district municipality, and in Tauragė county – Šilalė district municipality, 4 areas in Šiauliai county – Joniškis, Radviliškis, Šiauliai and Akmenė district municipalities, 5 areas in Vilnius county – Švenčionys and Šalčininkai district municipalities, and 6 areas in Utena county – Ignalina, Zarasai and Anykščiai district municipalities. (According to Kriaučiūnas and Daugirdas (2013), in the sparsely populated areas the rural population density does not exceed 12.5 inhabitants / km², and in the most sparsely populated areas this indicator is less than 7.5 inhabitants / km²). It is worth noting that the most

sparsely populated areas are located in Šiauliai, Vilnius and Utena counties, although in 2017 at the beginning of the year, the lowest population density, i.e. 10.1 inhabitants / km², was in Alytus district Varėna municipality. The analysis of the selected areas as municipal centers varies from town, small town to village, and the proportion of the inhabitants living in them ranges from 81.4 % (Baltoji Vokė, Šalčininkai district municipality) to 20.3 % (Labanoras, Švenčionys district municipality) of municipal population. Of the 19 districts, schools of general education work in 14 districts, in some of them there are a few schools: this applies to the towns of Švenčionėliai and Pabradė (Švenčionys district municipality) and the town of Baltoji Vokė (Šalčininkai district municipality), in which most of the inhabitants are Lithuanian, Polish, and Russians. Of the 19 schools in the analyzed areas, the schools that did not change their status were in 4 districts, i.e. the schools in Salakas (Zarasai district municipality), Švenčionėliai, and Pabradė (Švenčionys municipality) and the town of Baltoji Vokė. In the course of the reorganization of the school network, secondary schools or gymnasium units operating in 5 locations were reorganized into main schools, gymnasiums in other areas or removed in general: Marcinkonys village (Varėna district municipality), Kruopiai town (Akmenė district municipality), Dūkštas town, Rimšė village, and Kazitiškis village (Ignalina municipality) schools. The position of the main schools has lost the status of Gaižaičiai village (Joniškis district municipality), Šaukotas village (Radviliškis municipality), Medingėnai village (Rietavas municipality), Kazliškis village (Rokiškis district municipality), Raudėnai village (Šiauliai municipality), and Didkiemis rural (Šilalė district municipality) schools: after the reorganization the children of these areas attend gymnasium units or multifunctional centers operating in the same and other areas. In the absence of the necessary number of pupils, schools disappeared in 6 districts: in Rimšės and Kazitiškis villages (Ignalina district municipality), Kaltanėnai and Labanoras townships (Švenčionys district municipality), Andrioniškis town (Anykščiai district municipality), and Degučiai village (Zarasai district municipality). The summarized analysis of the data is presented in the following Table 1

Table 1 Some indicators of the most sparsely populated areas associated with the accessibility of education

Municipality	Population density at the beginning of 2017 (inhabitants / km ²)	SPA location with the status of the administrative centre	The proportion of the population in the area (in the total number of municipality population in %)	School in the area	Previous school status
Varėna district municipality	10.1	Marcinkonys	46.1	Lower Secondary School	Secondary School

Ignalina district municipality	11.0	Dūkštas	52.1	Gymnasium (in the other area) Unit	Secondary School
Ignalina district municipality	11.0	Rimšė	23.7	No School	Secondary School Unit
Ignalina district municipality	11.0	Kazitiškis	33.9	No School	Gymnasium Unit
Zarasai district municipality	12.1	Salakas	51.9	Salakas Lower Secondary School	Hasn't changed
Zarasai district municipality	12.1	Degučiai	28.5	No School	Primary School Unit
Rietavas district municipality	13.2	Medingėnai	61.4	Gymnasium Unit	Lower Secondary School
Anykščiai district municipality	14.2	Andrioniškis	44.0	No School	Primary School Unit
Švenčioniai district municipality	14.5	Kaltanėnai	45.5	No School	Lower Secondary School
Švenčioniai district municipality	14.5	Labanoras	20.3	No School	Primary School
Švenčioniai district municipality	14.5	Švenčionėliai	78.7	Gymnasium & Progymnasium	Hasn't changed
Švenčioniai district municipality	14.5	Pabradė	77.5	Gymnasium (Lithuanian); Gymnasium (Polish & Russian)	Hasn't changed
Rokiškis district municipality	16.9	Kazliškis	25.5	Primary School Unit	Lower Secondary School
Joniškis district municipality	19.5	Gaižaičiai	45.5	Gymnasium Unit	Lower Secondary School
Šilalė district municipality	20.0	Didkiemis	74.3	Gymnasium Unit	Lower Secondary School
Šalčininkai district municipality	21.3	Baltoji Vokė	81.4	Gymnasium (Lithuanian); Gymnasium (Polish)	Hasn't changed
Radviliškis district municipality	22.7	Šaukotas	44.6	Gymnasium Unit	Lower Secondary School

Šiauliai district municipality	22.9	Raudėnai	30.6	School-Multifunctional Centre	Lower Secondary School
Akmenė district municipality	23.9	Kruopiai	53.5	Lower Secondary School	Secondary School

Conclusions

The analysis of the scientific research on the development of Lithuanian territories has revealed that in the 21st century the tendency of the development of territories is becoming more and more evident in Lithuania: the development of rural areas into sparsely / most sparsely populated. With an increasing number of villages with a low population (up to 10 inhabitants), and families with children among them, there may emerge increasing difficulties in meeting the educational needs of children. All the more so, due to the decline in the number of population, more and more schools are closed each year. Therefore, the problem of access to education is becoming more and more urgent for children living in sparsely populated areas of Lithuania.

The analysis of statistical data has highlighted that the social development of Lithuanian districts affects the availability of education for children living in sparsely populated areas of Lithuania. The density of population in districts reveals the decreasing number of general education schools and pupils, especially in less urbanized counties of Lithuania. For example, the comparison of the years 2016 – 2017 and 2012 – 2013 reveals that the number of schools in three of the 10 counties of Lithuania (Šiauliai, Tauragė, and Utena) decreased by more than 10 %, while the number of pupils during the analyzed period did not decrease only in Vilnius County, whereas the number of pupils in seven counties decreased from 17 to 20 %. Therefore, it can be stated that the availability of education for children of school age living in sparsely populated areas of Lithuania is becoming a problem not only at the level of self-government institutions but also at the level of the state.

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