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# **RURAL YOUTH AT THE CROSSROADS**

**TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES IN CENTRAL EUROPE  
AND BEYOND**

Edited by

Kai A. Schafft, Sanja Stanić, Renata Horvatek,  
and Annie Maselli



**ROUTLEDGE**



# Contents

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## Chapter 6

# The contradictions of education in Russia

## Resilient and struggling schools in the context of rural depopulation and decline

Roman Zvyagintsev, Marina Pinskaya, David Konstantinovskiy, and Sergey Kosaretsky

In this chapter, we examine the characteristics of high-performing schools in disadvantaged areas of rural Russia. We first provide a historical context for rural youth development and the persistent spatial inequalities that have differentially shaped opportunities. We then review research on territorial inequalities in modern Russia, with a specific focus on the differences in academic outcomes and opportunities for rural and urban youth. In the second half of the chapter, we discuss qualitative research conducted in rural schools in two very different regions of the Russian Federation: the Tomsk Oblast region and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). We use focus group and individual interview data with principals, teachers, parents, and students to investigate the various factors affecting rural youth educational experiences, how the specificities of rural context shape youth aspirations for their adult lives, and the factors that appear to differentiate resilient from low-performing schools.

Settlements in Russia are divided into urban and rural. The classification of a settlement into a particular category is not determined at the federal level, but rather is regulated by state authorities of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. About one in four Russians live in rural locations, a just slightly higher percentage than the rural population of Europe overall (United Nations, 2019). However, low and declining populations and low population densities are a distinctive feature of rural settlements in modern Russia, a result of long-term processes of rural depopulation. About 88% of villages have a population that size or fewer persons, with many villages containing significantly fewer than that size (Surinov, 2018). As Wegren (2016) reports, between 2002 and 2010, the number of villages with ten or fewer residents rose from 34,000 to 36,200, by which time well over the majority of all villages had fewer than 50 residents. Furthermore, villages were for all intents and purposes completely depopulated. Because of the official figures likely underestimate the extent of depopulation because of the number of those who have left rural areas but have not changed their residential registration.

Rural depopulation is not a new issue in Russia. For much of the 20th century, communities within rural Russia depended on state redistribution of resources and non-market mechanisms to ensure rural well-being and viability, with rural economies largely revolving around collectivized agriculture. Public policies and consolidation of villages and centralization of rural services, with rural economies which had already become a vexing issue by the mid-20th century being especially pronounced in the post-Soviet 1990s, driven by increasing rural-urban wage gaps, falling standards of living within rural areas, and aging populations (Wegien, 2016). Processes leading to rural population loss have had direct and important implications for education in rural areas. Small villages often do not have enough students to fill all school grades, and the maintenance of a full-fledged school in such settlements (especially utilities: electricity, heating, but also the salaries of school workers) is calculated per student and is much more costly for local budgets despite legislation that allows public support for local school financing.

The precarity of rural schooling in Russia is further increased as a consequence of the level of local control in educational administration which is vested in “first-level” urban and municipal districts. Municipal districts overseeing educational administration may include dozens and, in some cases, hundreds of villages. Fully 40% of municipal districts manage educational provision for between 40 and 100 settlements, and 8.5% of municipal districts manage educational provision for 200 or more villages. This creates significant challenges for the management of rural education and leaves rural communities with little say or political control over local schools and educational decision-making (Abankina, 2005). All of these challenges are compounded by the significant education budget differences across regions, coupled by the underfunding of social institutions. And finally, rural areas are distinguished by a low density of roads and transportation infrastructure, and development of telecommunications.

### **Educational disparities in urban and rural schools in modern Russia**

Even during the time of the Soviet Union, official state ideology asserted there was equal access to public goods and benefits. This concept was supported not only by frequent repetition by the state, but also by statistics which reinforced this assertion. In particular, data on the representation of factory workers and peasants within the educational system was cited by Soviet propaganda as evidence of equal opportunities for all members of society. However, the Siberian study (Shubkin, Artemov, Moskalenko, Buzukova, & Kalmyk, 1968), initiated in the 1960s and based on representative data, demonstrated that Soviet society was far from equal. It showed that while workers and peasants were praised by political leaders, their children had the least opportunity to pursue higher education among all Soviet youth (Konstantinovsky & Shubkin, 1970; Rutkevich & Filippov, 1978). These spatial disparities continue to pose serious challenges to educational

equity in Russia and are not simply educational in nature, but are the result of a tangle of social, political, economic, and demographic processes.

In the 21st century, rural schools were restructured in Russia, during which time many under-enrolled and under-resourced schools were closed—a decrease of 40% since 2001. Students in settlements with closed schools must attend larger schools in neighboring settlements. There are currently more than 27,000 rural schools in Russia, accounting for more than 60% of the total number of schools (Surinov, 2018), although the total number and proportion of rural schools have decreased as a consequence of school closures related to declining enrollments. Even though 60% of schools are rural, the number of students in rural schools is just one third the number of students in urban schools (3.86 million versus 12.38 million, respectively), and the average city school is almost five times larger than the average rural school.

School settings for urban and rural children show major differences, a fact recognized and confirmed by educational statistics, national monitoring, and independent studies conducted over the past decade and a half (Kosaretsky, Pinskaya, & Grunicheva, 2014; Roshchina, 2005). Small and sparse rural populations mean that schools are not always staffed with highly qualified teachers, and such schools often have a lack of advanced programs and special resources (such as school PCs, smart tables, projectors, etc.) (Surinov, 2018). In the most resource-poor rural contexts, schools may have a small number of students in each class in which one teacher teaches several subjects. Poor access to transport services and severe environmental conditions considerably exacerbate the problem in many regions (Froumin & Kasprzhak, 2012).

Unequal access to educational opportunities, including access to modern infrastructure and high-quality school curricula, has been recognized by the government as an ongoing challenge (Froumin & Kasprzhak, 2012; Kuzminov & Froumin, 2018), and expanding equal access to quality educational opportunities in rural areas has been identified as a primary target for state programs and educational policies in the 21st century. Various measures attempting to mitigate educational inequalities have been proposed and implemented, including not simply the closure and reorganization of small schools, but also providing supplies transportation options, modernization of school infrastructure, increasing teaching staff, increasing funding for small schools, and providing targeted social benefits and bonus pay for teachers in rural schools (Kosaretsky, Froumin, & Kuzminov, 2019a). While these measures have improved the infrastructure of general education in rural areas, substantial rural-urban disparities still remain, as Table 6.1 suggests (Kosaretsky et al., 2019a; Surinov, 2018).

Only 32.5% of rural students are likely to be involved in specialized education programs compared with 60.5% of urban students (Surinov, 2018). Rural students are less involved in school-based afterschool education programs. At the same time, they are less engaged in extracurricular activities. One third of parents in rural areas noted that their children have limited access to extracurricular activity

Table 6.1 Percentage of infrastructural differences between rural and urban schools

	Rural schools	Urban schools
Running water	85.8	96.8
Sewerage system	86.4	96.4
Central heating	88.4	97.3
Event hall	28.7	49.9
School nurse/health office	26.8	60.4
High-speed internet (more than 30 Mbps)	9.0	28.0
Full access to e-learning technologies	5.9	16.2

Source: Data from Russia in Figures 2018 (Surinov, 2018)

outside school, such as art, music, or sports. By contrast, at the national level, only 23.8% reported limited access to extracurricular activities. Modern activities such as robotics or programming are less frequently available in supplementary education programs at rural schools (Kosaretsky et al., 2019b).

Disparities in academic attainment of rural and urban school children are also seen in international comparative studies of educational achievement reports. According to our analysis of Russian student results in the latest PISA 2018 survey (Adamovich, Kapuza, Zakharov, & Froumin, 2019), urban students outperformed their rural counterparts in reading by 72 points, in mathematics by 64 points, and in science by 63 points. Compared with 2015, rural students' results in reading decreased by 23 points, while urban students' performance improved in all three subjects, albeit only slightly (Adamovich et al., 2019).

Rural school graduates are less successful at the Unified State Examination (USE), the exam conducted at the end of the 11th grade determining a student's opportunities to enter a higher education institution. In addition to USE in 11th grade (end of upper-secondary school), there is also the Main State Examination (MSE) in the 9th grade, the end of compulsory secondary school. The USE is the most important assessment program for Russian students. In 2009, it was introduced to both replace and standardize a previously existing system of institutional-level final examinations and was one of the core elements of major educational reform in Russia. The USE was also introduced as a way to combat corruption in university entrance decisions. Currently, nearly a million students take the examination every year (Tyumeneva, 2013). As Table 6.2 suggests, the rural-urban gap is not only present for the 11th grade qualifying examination but is a consistent pattern across ages and school grade levels.

The chances of higher-performing rural school graduates entering and completing higher education have increased in the past decade because the USE provides more objective and transparent rules for admission (Tyumeneva, 2013). At the

Table 6.2 2019 State academic assessment results: percentage high and low scorers in rural, urban, and all school settings

	School locality		
	Rural	Urban	All
Unified State Examination, 11th grade	High 15.0	30.6	26.0
	Low 25.5	14.4	17.8
Main State Examination, 9th grade	High 22.5	33.6	29.9
	Low 24.2	16.8	19.1
All Russian testing, 6th grade	High 26.1	36.1	33.2
	Low 47.3	38.5	41.0
All Russian testing, 5th grade	High 24.4	30.3	28.6
	Low 35.0	29.1	30.8
All Russian testing, 4th grade	High 28.4	41.2	37.3
	Low 15.4	8.6	10.7

Source: Data from Federal Institute for Educational Quality Assessment (FEIQA, 2018)

Note: For the Unified State Exam, a "high score" is classified as 70 or more out of 100, while a "low score" is classified as 40 or less out of 100. For other results, a "high score" is a "5" (the equivalent of an A or A-), while a "low score" is a "3" or less (the equivalent of a C+ or less).

same time, even for successful graduates, the high level of living expenses and associated costs during university study remains a barrier for many rural students to attend metropolitan universities and constitutes a primary reason why their rural students with good test scores and academic records are less likely than their urban counterparts to choose to enter university study (Zakharov & Adamovich, 2020).

Given these processes, we were interested in identifying factors that can shape student outcomes, and especially positive academic achievement outcomes set by disadvantaged rural community and school contexts. We proceed from the idea that despite the various socioeconomic, resource, and personnel restrictions for the territorial location and domestic policy of the country (e.g., budget spending on education in Russia is less than 4.5%<sup>1</sup>), each school is partly responsible for the quality of education their students receive, the values and norms that are transmitted, and how well students are prepared for making important life decisions. The possibilities for schools within disadvantaged rural settings do more, and others do less. Thus, we first examine how rural Russian schools shape educational trajectories and life paths of their students. Second, we examine which school strategies and practices enhance or reduce the life prospects of young people.

<sup>1</sup> See Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation (2020).

## Researching rural youth in contemporary Russia

Our study combines both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to analyze quantitative survey data collected in two regions of the Russian Federation, the Tomsk Oblast region and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (Figure 6.1), as well as school-level USE results obtained from the Regional Education Quality Assessment Centers of the selected regions. We apply aggregate school-level contextual indicators and academic results to identify schools of interest, classified as either “resilient” or “struggling.” We chose these regions because they are located in the “European” part of the country (where population density is much higher, there is less distance between settlements and, in general, more favorable economic and institutional conditions resulting from the proximity of Moscow and St. Petersburg), and because they have a similar level of urbanization: Yakutia’s population is urban and 72% Tomsk Oblast’s population is urban (Srinov, 2018). They do not differ much in the ratio of rural and urban schools (70/30 in Yakutia and 60/40 in Tomsk Oblast) and are almost equal in population (about 1 million inhabitants).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Yakutia is an ethnic region with a very low population density (50% of the population is Yakuts [Sakha], whereas Tomsk Oblast is a much more representative region for the Russian Federation (90% of the population is Russian)).<sup>3</sup>

The second stage of the research, and the main focus of this chapter, is qualitative and based on analyses of interviews conducted with all participants of the school educational process from both resilient and struggling schools. We do not compare these two regions, but, on the contrary, look for similar strategies and practices used by rural schools from different regions. In this part of the chapter, we attempt to comparatively understand the main differentiating characteristics of each school type. To differentiate schools and classify them as resilient or struggling, we use two distributions: the distribution of schools by academic results (mean school USE score for 11th grade schools and mean school MSE score for 9th grade schools)<sup>4</sup> and the distribution of schools by their socioeconomic status (SES) (Pinskaya, Kosaretsky, Zvyagintsev, & Derbishire, 2019). All schools of interest for us are in the lowest SES quartile for each region. We define resilient schools as low SES schools with high academic results in the region (upper quartile of results distribution). We define underperforming schools as low SES schools with low academic results (lower quartile of distribution of results).

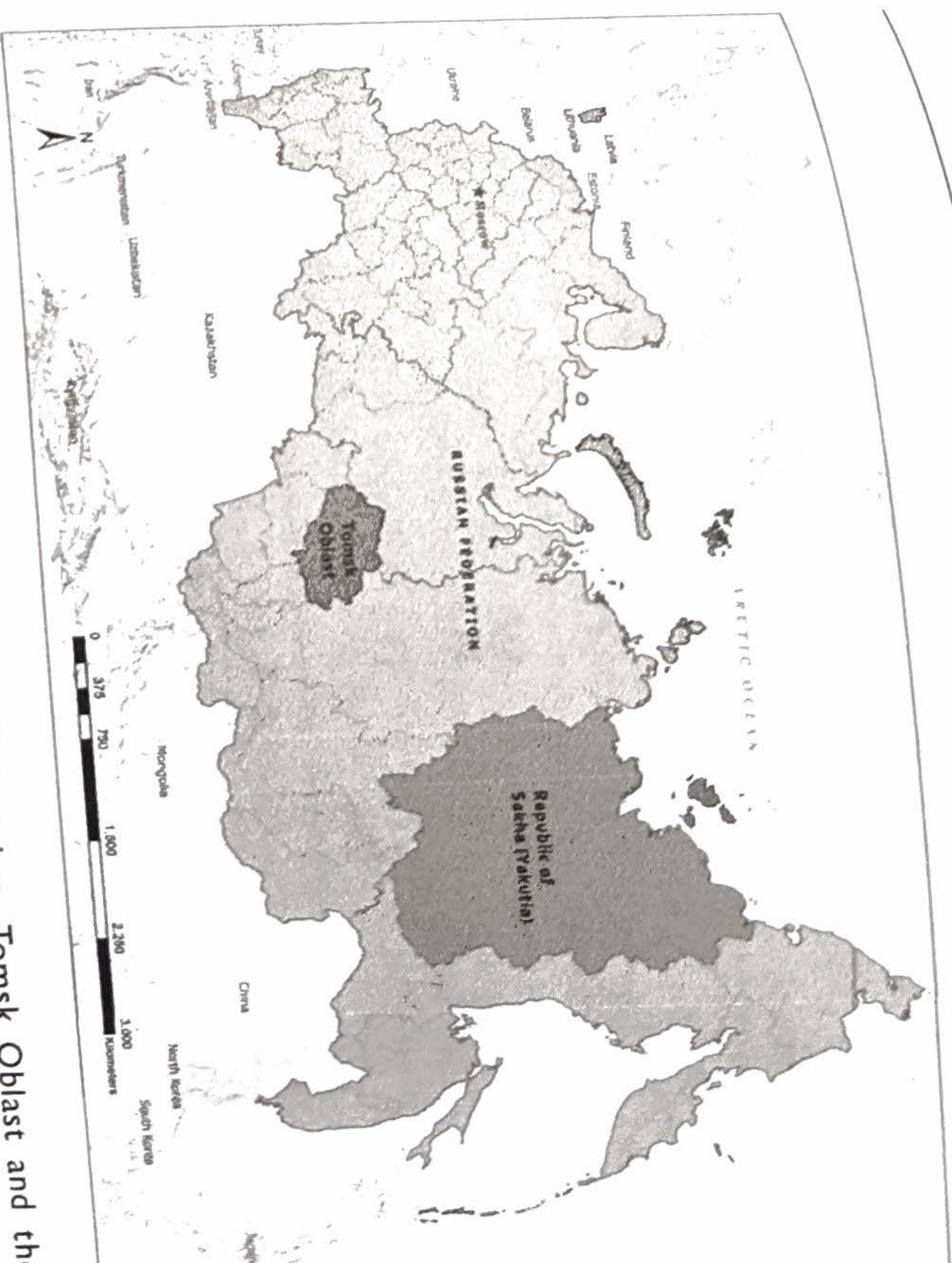


Figure 6.1 Studied regions of the Russian Federation, Tomsk Oblast and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)  
Source: Map developed by Annie Maselli, The Pennsylvania State University

### Sample

The sample in the quantitative part of the analysis included 87% of all schools in the Tomsk Oblast region and 60% of all schools in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). From these schools, in each region separately, we selected the schools of interest using the classification processes described earlier.<sup>5</sup> We then conducted site visits at four schools in each region, two resilient and two struggling, gathering data from interviews and focus groups. Table 6.3 presents a set of descriptive statistics from the resilient and struggling study schools in each region. Specific schools were randomly selected from those that met our requirements in terms of academic results and SES. It is important to note that resilient schools are a rare occurrence. Our studies reveal that they account for less than 5% of all schools (Pinskaya et al., 2019). Disadvantaged rural schools with poor academic attainment levels are a much more common phenomenon; unfortunately, most rural schools in Russia fit this description. First, we provide a general review of various

2 See Federal State Statistics Service (2020a).

3 See Federal State Statistics Service (2020b).

4 Students finish compulsory secondary school at the 9th grade (15–16 years) and can either leave school or remain for two more years to complete upper-secondary education (17–18 years) and then take the USE. Some schools in Russia do not have 10th and 11th grades at all.

5 The Tomsk Oblast region contained 11 resilient and 38 struggling schools, while the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) contained 19 resilient and 40 struggling schools.





disadvantaged families. Yet, we noted striking similarities across the resilient schools we visited, as well as striking differences compared with the resilient struggling schools. We discuss struggling schools later in the next section. The two resilient schools of the Tomsk region are located in two different villages. One of the villages has fewer than 500 inhabitants; the other has a little less than 1,000. The road to the regional center takes two and two and a half hours, respectively (100 and 130 km). The residents here are mainly small farmers or work in the social sphere. The larger settlement also has an equestrian base and a sawmill. Resilient schools from Yakutia are located in villages whose sizes do not exceed 500 residents. The distance to the regional center is greater (about 200 km for one and a little more for the second) and accessible mainly by the Lena River, which complicates transport accessibility (especially in the summer). The population here is engaged in the seasonal harvesting of herbs and mushrooms, or leaves for a part of the year to work in the city. Climatic conditions are less favorable than in the Tomsk region. Life in these settlements is very different from urban life: fewer amenities, entertainment, resources for cultural or sports activities, and worse internet quality. Life here is very typical for the rural areas of these regions.

#### *A friendly and inclusive school environment*

When a child comes to a resilient school, they find themselves in a friendly environment that is safe and comfortable. The nature of the school environment is crucially different from the traditionally dull and cold environment of a typical poor school. The creation of a comprehensive high-quality learning environment appears to be a conscious priority and the basis of a focused strategy for the school principal. The environment is warm and homelike. Whereas the school is small, teachers, students, and parents communicate closely and have good relations based on mutual trust. As one of the principals related: "Here we are all together, we are the family."

In resilient schools, principals and teachers emphasize that the school explicitly cultivates a culture of mutual tolerance; harassment and bullying are strictly forbidden. Students with special needs who study according to special education programs participate in classes and in all educational and extracurricular activities like any other student. This environment encourages students to trust one another and adults, and it functions as a protective factor against stressors that children from socially disadvantaged families often face. The environment that supports socioemotional well-being builds confidence and self-assurance, which later will encourage young people to make responsible life choices and facilitate social mobility.

#### *Promoting the value of education*

In addition to emphasizing the psychological well-being of students, schools emphasize the value of education; responsibility and diligence in learning is

seen as a virtue. Referencing this culture of learning, one of the school principals told us:

It is very important for me that the children have an appropriate environment. I create an appropriate environment. It is very important for me that the children have an appropriate environment. I tell the children: 'I perform my duties; I create an appropriate environment. I tell the children: 'I perform my duties; I create an appropriate environment, but why don't you fulfill your duties? Your duty is to learn. I create the environment, but why don't you contribute and fulfill your duties?'

A positive climate and a rich educational environment represent important conditions for successful school performance, especially in the context of resource adversity. However, it must be emphasized that these conditions are not sufficient to ensure high educational achievement. High expectations supported by clear requirements and monitoring of achievements are essential. Here our study is consistent with previous school success studies (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Martin & Marsh, 2008; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011) regarding types of educational policies and practices pursued by the resilient school. Teachers monitor the dynamics of each student's performance, flagging unsatisfactory grades and continued underperformance. Educational problems are also solved together with parents, whom teachers try to engage as full participants in the educational process. They regularly inform parents about student progress, the deterioration of academic performance, absenteeism, and other problems. Students are encouraged to immediately retake failed tests, stay at school after classes, or arrive earlier before classes start. Every-one at school, including the principal, teachers, parents, and students, clearly understand that diligence in learning and overall education are the foundation of success in life. In one school, a mother of three, and herself a graduate of the school, related:

The school is aimed primarily at providing education. This ensures that children acquire good knowledge and are able to move forward in life. Afterwards our children learn better; our daughter is exempted from final tests because of her excellent performance during the university term; her knowledge is strong. This is due to foundation laid by the school. . . . The requirements are quite high. Every day one has to do his/her home assignment. The teacher additionally prepares for exams after regular hours. At home she [an eleventh-grade student] studies a lot. She is afraid of mathematics. I tell her: a teacher will prepare you.

The students we interviewed in different schools reiterated the importance of teacher engagement and approachability, and how that in turn encouraged student success. An 11th-grade student told us:

Our teachers are professional. It's interesting to talk to them and to discuss everything. They train us well for academic competitions. I usually get

through to the regional competitions. In educational terms, everything is very comprehensive in our school. Even not being passionate for law, for example, I understand it well. Everything is fine with science. But they can't provide for example, for example. But we do not have these activities. However, there is an art school.

This student recognizes the resource limitations of the school but appreciates what resources exist and places a very high value overall on the availability of teachers and the quality of instruction. This was reiterated by an 8th-grade student, who we interviewed in another school. This boy is not an A-grade student, but he similarly said:

Teachers say, 'If you do not understand something, ask.' Anyone can easily say that you didn't understand something. I'm comfortable coming to the teacher if I don't understand something. Several times I came to the teacher of chemistry for extra classes on my own when I did not understand the material in order not to leave this problem unattended. I came to the teacher; she explained everything to me after classes.

The ability of teachers to effectively interact with children from all backgrounds and across all levels of education is an important part of the struggle with ongoing social and educational inequality, an insight underscored by Bourdieu's classic works suggesting how strongly children's backgrounds can influence their educational success within the context of communication with their teachers (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

#### *Valuing success*

The tradition of publicly highlighting the success of each student represents a very important strategy to support student motivation and increase self-esteem and academic confidence. One of the vice principals we interviewed stated:

We support all children. At our school assembly, we recognize and reward students. All winners and runners-up of academic competitions and contests and students with good academic grades are recognized each term; we also reward those who have received no more than one '3' grade. We recognize those, who have not missed any classes. They may not have studied very well, but they have not missed any classes. Recently, the awarding ceremony lasted for half an hour. And the children are so pleased that they are awarded in front of others. If someone drew the best painting, we award him/her.

Traditionally, remedial classes are held after school for those who have difficulty mastering new material and for those who want to improve their grades.

Graduation classes prepare the students for exams after school, including tutoring on majors, that is, subjects selected by the student for examination. The choice of the subjects is not limited in any way. An important part of this policy is that all students who have shown diligence in learning can be recognized as successful, not only those who attained the highest achievements.

#### *Organizing extracurricular educational opportunities and recreation*

Except for regular educational activities, children have the opportunity to develop their skills and capabilities in a variety of additional activities. The school operates according to the "full-time attendance model." Because parents who have a job spend almost an entire day away from home and cannot organize and supervise children's leisure time, the school takes over the organization of the second half of the day. Schools not only comply with general requirements, but also try to provide students with interesting and diverse activities. It is not easy to do this with limited financial resources; however, the school has sports sections and clubs that children attend after 4 pm; in addition, shortly after classes, extracurricular activity is organized for students from the 1st to the 7th grade.

The school closely cooperates with the local cultural center where rural residents, including schoolchildren, can attend music and dance classes. A mother of three, who was already cited earlier, described this:

After the lessons, all the children attend different interest groups. And low-performing students can attend remedial classes together with everyone else; weak children, observing the well-performing students, reach after them. There is a lot of time to prepare for exams; there are optional classes. A lot of additional education; they sing, they draw. They work a lot in the school garden. Children are always busy. School assemblies and awards are held every week.

Supplementary classes expand the range of children's interests and are considered part of education, cultural development, and, in a broad sense, socialization. Overall, socialization is a very important topic for schools. The readiness of young people for adult, independent life in a new urban environment is a constant challenge for schools. This is a common topic in conversations with teachers. Preparation for a professional pathway and career choice is also considered part of socialization of young people, and schools take on responsibility for this preparation.

#### **Creating aspirations and career choices**

School strategies aimed at preparing children to choose a professional trajectory have two components. The first is occupational guidance which consists of trips to

the city to visit universities and organizations of secondary vocational education.

Schools also invite representatives of different professions to the school and set up meetings with the students. Students also participate in professional aptitude tests organized by the Department of Education which are meant to provide insights regarding their skills and interests, and how that might guide them when choosing various professional and educational paths.

The second and equally important aspect of socialization is to prepare children to leave their safe, comfortable school environment. The principal and teachers emphasize that one of the goals of frequent trips to the city is getting the children to know other children and the city culture. Teachers understand that warm and almost familial relations of the school community will likely not be repeated after they graduate. Instead, young people need to be ready to stand up for themselves independently and be prepared to understand the broader world around them. One of the principals told us:

It is important for them to be adapted to life and to the city. Everything is different there, not like here. They must be able to navigate life, not be thrown out like fish on the shore, so that they can join another community and find a common language. They are very kind. We put a lot of work and care into them. So that in another environment, like in the dormitory, they feel fine.

Here we can see that, in certain situations, schools are compelled to take on the role of the family, since some children have no other options to receive such support. There are several reasons for this. Low-SES and single-parent families have to work long hours and are not able to devote enough time to their children. Socially troubled parents have challenges setting a good example for their children. It is essential that there is always an adult who is sufficiently involved in the child's life. The next positive factor is exactly about this—the engagement of the family in school life and children's learning.

#### *Promoting parental engagement*

We often hear from teachers in rural disadvantaged schools about negative examples that parents set for their children, about parents who cannot provide the necessary support for their children either in the early school years or in the future. Many parents do not actively participate in their children's school life or just attend parental meetings and passively carry out certain school assignments. There are also some parents who blame the school for learning and behavioral problems their children may experience, transferring responsibility for everything that happens to their children to the school.

Resilient schools treat parents as their partners in learning and find ways to engage parents. Each school has its own way of doing this, but the result is the same: parents trust the school and share the learning experience at school with their children. In one school, work with parents includes two tracks written into

the community education program. The first is where the teachers learn from the parents. In a focus group with teachers, one participant said:

Parents give a master class at home, we take children to their place or they come here, and we all learn from them. They can do what we cannot, like what you can make from horse's hair.

Parents learning." What is done within that track seems the second is known as "parents learning." The school offers various educational opportunities and unique. The school offers parents attend regular classes with the literature remarkable and unique. For example, parents attend regular classes with the literature in the evenings. For example, write compositions based on TV series in the evenings. For example, write compositions based on those on TV teacher, read and discuss some work of fiction, write compositions based on TV and in conclusion have a quiz-like contest under the same rules as those on TV shows. Clearly, in the atmosphere of mutual respect for one another, for studying, for education, which are values shared by all participants in the educational process, students develop a positive and bright picture of their future and build strength for personal growth (Pinskaya, Khavenson, Kosaretsky, Zvyagintsev, Mikhaylova, & Chirkina, 2018).

#### *Building external social capital*

Based on our study, resilient schools seem to be consistently implementing strategies to ensure that young people have the desire and ambition to learn and develop self-assurance and trust in the world around them. Another strategy is the community active interaction with its environment, shaping and strengthening the community that supports the school. It is important that the school build Probably best as "partnerships" not just with parents, but also with the entire rural community, of which the parents are a part. Tutors describe how this takes place:

The school holds seminars and regular sports events. The community helps the school, meeting us half-way. We organize concerts jointly with the hydraulic pump station or with the hospital. The kindergarten, stud farm, senior and intermediate grades have joined in. All were working on their numbers. Parents came up and had a wonderful performance. They will do anything for their kids.

Creating bonds with the community the school serves allows the school to develop greater social capital, expanding educational opportunities and students' prospects (Lindfors, Minkkinen, Rimpelä, & Hottelainen, 2018). The school makes up for the missing social capital of families with the social capital created by the school and uses it for the benefit of students, turning it, if necessary, into financial capital. Another school, just as the one described earlier, relies on the local community and possesses significant social capital. This school traditionally addresses financial issues that arise and provides economic support to students in need through the joint efforts of the whole school team, with contributions from the

local community. The school regularly receives support from many sponsors and its former students whose portraits and stories are displayed in the school corridor. Its former students often participate in school life as well, present their pieces of art, decorate the school, and meet with students. This is completely uncommon for schools in Russia, and achieving this took much effort and work on the part of the whole school team.

### **Factors contributing to ongoing disparities in low-performing disadvantaged schools**

We now look at what happens in the case of the four disadvantaged underperforming schools. It is necessary to take into account that the degree of social and economic disadvantage of these schools is higher than that of resilient schools. These schools are in even less favorable conditions than resilient ones. For example, all these schools are farther removed from regional centers (155–180 km for the Tomsk region and 250–300 km for Yakutia). The way to the regional center by car can take from two and a half hours for villages in the Tomsk region, up to five hours for villages in Yakutia (if the roads are washed out by rains). There is no regular bus or train connection. The size of settlements and the occupation of local residents here are approximately the same as the settlements in which resilient schools are located. The size of villages, lack of amenities, stove heating, and similar phenomena prevail in these areas. In the villages of Yakutia, weather conditions cause regular interruptions in electricity and the internet (as people here are forced to use mobile internet). The scarcity of school financial and human resources, geographic remoteness, and lack of school transportation represent extreme challenges for the school and exacerbate all the shortcomings of the chosen educational policy. But we should not ignore the fact that disadvantaged and low-performing schools that we describe are located in the same areas as resilient schools, which in terms of socioeconomic characteristics of their social makeup and the number of students and teachers are practically the same. However, we saw a completely different management of the educational process and interpersonal relations within disadvantaged schools.

#### *Low expectations*

The described schools do not have high academic aspirations and do not expect their students to demonstrate high achievement. Teacher expectations with respect to students are not too high; they aim at delivering the basic program but at a sub-optimal level. From the teachers' viewpoint, their main objective is to help poorly performing students to improve their performance and master at least the basic components of the school curriculum. In the process, stronger students may be overlooked or ignored. That is, teachers do not consider it possible or necessary to

satisfy the needs of more advanced students. In a focus group with teachers they told us:

Well-performing students grasp everything at once without help and poor performers fail to progress, and you come up and help them. Good performers advance on their own.

Research has shown that teacher expectations can become a factor of students' resilience and are related to their motivation (Agasisti, Soncin, & Valenti, 2016; Longobardi, Agasisti, Avisati, & Borgonovi, 2018). It is problematic that school norms do not reinforce learning. As regards difficult subjects for specific students, such students prefer to cheat rather than to ask the teacher or classmates for help. An 8th-grade student described this as commonplace, noting, "even if there are only three students in the classroom, it is possible to cheat." This student described cheating as a shared behavior, and not just his own personal experience, and academic dishonesty as an accepted part of the educational experience, norms that unfortunately are already too common within Russia (Magnus, Potterovich, Danilov, & Savvateev, 2002).

#### *Ineffective socialization*

In struggling schools, teachers often emphasized that a main school objective was to help create a "good person" through moral and patriotic upbringing, an emphasis that can overshadow academic preparation. As one teacher told us, "The Minister of Education declared that the academic achievement is not the only significant thing, it is also important to bring up a person. This spiritual and moral aspect is very important in our school." In resilient schools, teachers who actually spend significant time with children apart from classes put a lot of effort into their moral education and upbringing. However, teachers, children, and parents alike understand that the most important thing in school is quality education. Some students demonstrate specific resilient attitudes, despite the low-performing school context. One 9th-grade student said, "I will achieve the goal that stands before me. Teachers say that I am a motivated person and will achieve a lot in life." The only student in the 9th grade out of 12 students from four schools who we interviewed demonstrated her strong determination to overcome all obstacles and to get higher education. Her position seems consistent with a resilient life trajectory. The girl wants to leave school after the 9th grade to enter vocational training and then go to the medical university. She added:

It is important for me to cope with everything and not to make mistakes at the exam. I'm trying my best and I'm trying to cope with everything. I'm serious about studying. I set the goal to become a pediatrician and I will do it, no matter what it costs me.

So, what is the difference between highly motivated and aspiring students in resilient and disadvantaged schools? It would seem that they are similar in significant. In one case, the school will give students ample support and provide the knowledge and experience necessary to achieve their goals. In the other case, students will have to struggle and overcome obstacles associated with the lack of educational and financial resources in their families on their own, without support in learning by the school, which does not consider it their duty. That said, these schools also struggle under conditions of extremely limited resources, as we have already mentioned (Pinskaya, Kosaretsky, & Froumin, 2011; Pinskaya et al., 2018). But we believe that this alone cannot explain such obvious differences in the characteristics of disadvantaged and resilient schools, which also stand in extremely difficult conditions, with severely limited resources.

## Conclusion

When negative external and internal school factors act cumulatively, students risk losing the life chances that further education in high school and deliberate choice of professional trajectory provide. Their learning and life trajectories unfold differently, but for the most part they struggle to break free from poverty. It is vitally important that schools persistently help to build agency, self-determination, and resilience in their students and help them make conscious and informed decisions on their choices of life trajectory. We must acknowledge that the school's ability to provide children with life chances is limited, and the lack of family financial and social resources will significantly affect their choices of academic and professional trajectory (Amini & Nivorozhkin, 2015). At the same time, teachers' low expectations and low parental aspirations can negatively affect students' academic performance and can hinder high achievements of rural young people and their mobility, as well as limit their life goals and chances. The local community also plays a critically important role in shaping education aspirations of rural youth (Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newson, 2000). Communities with strong social capital (Coleman, 1988) can build strong ties with parents and local entities. Resilient schools can provide examples of how this works and what strategies can be used.

As we discussed in the beginning of this chapter, much of rural Russia faces severe social, economic, and demographic challenges. If we simply consider social and economic mobility for young people in rural Russia, the unfortunate reality is that for many rural youth, opportunity for their future life lies elsewhere, outside the village (Looker & Naylor, 2009). Villages in rural Russia have steadily lost population and economic opportunity, and increasingly exist on the institutional and infrastructural margins (Guriev & Vakulenko, 2013). Therefore, from the standpoint of social and economic mobility alone, the irony is that if rural

schools provide a high-quality educational experience for young people, those same youth have a high chance of leaving the rural home area and not returning, simply because of the lack of economic opportunity. In this context, without rural community and regional development, despite the advantages rural schools may provide to youth, they may very well work against the best interests and continued sustainability of the villages they serve and even the rural school itself. In main indicator of success is to export talented youth to an urban "elsewhere." In this respect, resilient rural schooling may only further undermine the resiliency and sustainability of rural places and spaces.

This raises an important question for policy and practice. That is, what should the role of rural education be for rural development? These dilemmas are by no means unique to Russia (see, e.g., Corbett, 2007; Petrin, Schaff, & Meece, 2014; Thissen, Drooglever Fortuijn, Strijker, & Haartsen, 2010). Rural areas around the globe have faced very similar dilemmas, although the dilemma that Russia faces is on a large scale indeed. The general development trends of modern Russia are such that rural territories are deprived, with many villages at risk of disappearing altogether. Rural schools and teachers cannot change these macro-level trends. They therefore simply do what is in their power for each individual child. This probably does not make rural life better as a whole, but it provides some young people with skills and knowledge to act on their aspirations for a future life.

A change in this situation can only occur through a fundamental change in the country's course: moving away from strongly hierarchical power structures in governance and planning, reducing the concentration of resources in the capital, and redistributing the country's budget, with a focus on the development of the social sphere instead of power structures. If that political will does exist, one policy direction might be to consider the ways in which, in the best of circumstances, rural schools can function as true assets to the communities they serve, building social solidarity, social capital, and even economic opportunity. A worthy focus of research may well be to attempt to identify those schools that are doing just that—combining the provision of high-quality education along with community building and local opportunity that may help to create possibilities for young people to envision a happy, healthy, and successful life that does not necessarily mean abandoning the rural home place. It remains to be seen, however, whether there are the resources or the political will to place focused attention on the fate of Russia's rural areas or whether they will be left to "go it alone" in the face of longer-term trends of rural out-migration and disappearing villages.

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## Chapter 7

# The case of Serbia

## The orientations of rural young adults towards education, work, and emigration

Dušan Mojić, Irena Petrović, and Vera Backović

The youth and young adult transition to adulthood in post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe has been an important topic of sociological studies since the fall of the region's socialist regimes (e.g., Kovacheva, 2001; Roberts, 2009; Tomanović, 2012b; Ule, 2012). Usually, the three main focal points of these studies include the region's socialist regimes (e.g., Kovacheva, 2001; Roberts, 2009; Tomanović, 2012b; Ule, 2012). Usually, the three main focal points of these studies include the education-to-work transition, the family transition, and the political transition to citizenship. Although these processes are interlinked, the transition from the education-to-work transition, the family transition, and the political transition to citizenship. Although these processes are most crucial in the overall transition to adulthood (Biggart & Walther, 2006). The majority of studies refer to youth and young adults in general, neglecting the specific context of place, much less rural areas and settlements. Understanding the lives of young people is incomplete without acknowledging the diverse contexts that surround and shape their experiences. As Panelli (2002) put it, “these contexts include the rural environment in which they live, and that constrain and/or enable young people’s lives” (p. 114). These dynamic and ever-changing contexts operate at the local level of immediate rural environments but are also embedded within wider regional, national, and global dynamics.

Although Serbian youth studies have experienced somewhat of a recent revival (e.g., Mojić, 2012; Mojić & Petrović, 2013; Tomanović, 2012a, 2012b; Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015), rural youth in Serbia have continued to be overlooked in empirical studies. Tholen and colleagues (2012) note that there is only limited knowledge of this population, and young adults are simply a “forgotten subject” (p. 10). This paucity of research is particularly surprising since the rural-urban distinction has remained dominant as a divide of a social world and opposite poles, both in terms of the physical surrounding, as well as cultural-institutional organizations (Benevolo, 2004). Pušić (2000) suggests that many problems of Serbia’s social development originate from a long-lasting misunderstanding between its “two faces” of rural and urban identity. Highlighting the standing between its “two faces” of rural and urban identity. Highlighting the This chapter is devoted to an analysis of this “forgotten subject.” Highlighting the post-socialist rural context, we aim to focus on the impact of the structural context in Serbia and the effects on rural young adults’ orientation towards education, work, and emigration.