

OCCUPATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS OF RURAL YOUTH IN CROATIA

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Abstract/Izveček The present study is as an attempt to understand how socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, family socioeconomic status) and school level supports (i.e., school climate, professional guidance at school) influence occupational and educational expectations among rural youth (i.e., aspirations for a meaningful career, future family values, and future employment goals). The findings showed a relationship among the demographic characteristics, school level supports, career aspirations and future family and employment expectations of rural youth. The results of regression analysis indicate that school climate does influence aspirations towards a meaningful career, future family orientation and future employment goals. In addition, aspirations towards a meaningful career are also influenced by gender and professional guidance at school.

Profesionalna in izobraževalna pričakovanja podeželske mladine na Hrvaškem Predstavljena študija je poskus razumevanja, kako socialno-demografske značilnosti (tj. spol, družinski socialno-ekonomski status) in šolska raven (t.i. šolska klima, poklicno usmerjanje v šoli) vplivajo na poklicna in izobrazbena pričakovanja podeželske mladine (t.i. težnje po smiselni karieri, prihodnjih družinskih vrednotah ter prihodnjih zaposlitvenih ciljih). Ugotovitve so pokazale, da obstaja povezava med demografskimi značilnostmi, podporo šole, poklicnimi usmeritvami in bodočimi pričakovanji družine ter možnostmi zaposlitve podeželske mladine. Rezultati regresijske analize kažejo, da šolsko ozračje vpliva na težnje po smiselni karieri, bodoči družinski naravnosti in prihodnji zaposlitveni usmerjenosti. Ob tem na nagnjenje k smiselni karieri vplivata tako spol kot strokovno usmerjanje v šoli.

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Introduction

Educational policy impacts schooling opportunities in rural communities, and it is important to recognize the strong connections and commitments many rural young people have toward their community (Schafft, 2016). In Croatia, education and educational attainment are highly valued in society. As a European Union (EU) member, Croatia is known for emphasizing the importance of education, with an emphasis on making sure children graduate from high school. According to the latest statistical data, Croatia has the lowest high school dropout rate in the EU, with only 3.3% of students leaving school early (European Commission, 2020). Research suggests that academic achievement is associated with a student's socioeconomic status (SES) (Berliner, 2006; Ruiz, McMahon & Jason, 2018) and that there is a link between educational attainment and health status (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2011). Within the Croatian context, inclusive measures directed towards children from disadvantaged groups are implemented at a very early age (Macura Milovanovic et al., 2014). Moreover, teacher education programs in Croatia emphasize the development of more inclusive schools to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach his/her fullest potential (Batarelo Kokić, Kurz, & Novosel, 2016).

However, resources are not always equally distributed across rural and urban schools. The lack of resources in rural areas can result in a decrease in occupational and educational opportunities (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). The present study was conducted as part of a larger study on the youth aspirations and demographic changes in rural Croatia, in an attempt to understand how demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, family SES) and school level supports (i.e. school climate, professional guidance at school) influence the occupational and educational expectations of rural youth (i.e. aspirations for a meaningful career, future family values, future employment goals) (*The presented results are part of the project "Youth Aspirations, Identity, and Demographic Change in Rural Croatia: Implications for Education and Rural and Regional Development" (2017-2018). We thank Pennsylvania State University and the University of Split for funding this research project.*) The primary objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between demographic characteristics, school level supports, and the occupational and educational expectations of rural youth. With this research agenda in mind, we explored the following research questions:

(1) What are the levels of perceived attitudes towards the school climate, school professional guidance, aspirations for a meaningful career and future perspectives among rural youth? (2) Is there a relationship between demographic characteristics, school level supports and occupational and educational expectations among rural youth? (3) What is the direction of the association between demographic characteristics, school level supports and occupational and educational expectations among rural youth?

Occupational and Educational Expectations in Croatia

In a study on the power of education as a channel for social promotion or as an instrument of life quality change, young people recognized higher levels of education as way to achieve professional progress and future success (Ilišin & Spajić Vrkaš, 2015). Furthermore, the recognition of educational attainment can be observed from the wider sociocultural aspect of transition. The higher education degree is very much valued in Croatian society, and there is apparent trust that scientific institutions and science will ensure a safer, more secure and productive future (Šundalić, 2008). These tendencies can be partly attributed to the educational attainment-related values inherited from the period of socialism, as is the case in other transition countries (Brown & Schafft, 2002). In the 1960s, many citizens had access to secondary and tertiary education. These changes in the educational composition of the population were the result of the number of those attending school after the Second World War (Steinman, 1972). However, strong industrialization led to large migrations from rural to urban areas. These migrations led to problems in urban areas, such as an increase in unemployment. The uncontrolled rural exodus lowered the agricultural population potential; there were no structural transformations in agriculture, and there was an apparent dominance of small and marginal economies. This lack of structural change further weakened the development of agriculture and other branches of the rural economy (Župančić, 1993). The described situation required action in order to establish a better balance of development in rural and urban areas, which has been recorded in many parts of the world (*In this sense, the Education for Rural Development (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003) initiative was launched at the global level with the aim of improving the quality of and access to basic education.*) This was particularly important in regard to the significant number of rural areas (almost 80%) in the total land area of the country, where the rural population makes up 56.7% of the total population (Rural Development Program of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2014-2020).

There is a need for development of lifelong learning programs that focus on the needs of people in rural areas. This is directly linked to the development of human potential of rural villages and agriculture, as well as the return of the educated young population to rural areas, while emphasizing quality education in general (Žutinić & Markovina, 2009). Successful approaches to secondary education in Croatia have also increased aspirations towards the attainment of higher education degrees. In recent years, there has been a mass participation of young people in higher education, followed by an increase in the number of highly educated people among the working-age population (Puzić & Košutić, 2015).

Despite these improvements, the share of people that hold a higher education degree in Croatia is still smaller than in most EU countries. This trend is supported by the development of a wider network of higher education institutions. Over the last 15 years, there has been an increase in the availability of higher education access in all Croatian counties. According to the statistical data from 2016, in Croatia there were about 4.2 million inhabitants, and 132 higher education institutions, while 10 years ago, there were 114 higher education institutions (SBS, 2018; SBS, 2008). Most of these institutions are public and have no student tuition fees. After the period of socialism in the 1990s, partial tuition was introduced for a certain quota of students enrolled at universities. This was abolished after strong pressure from the wider public and students themselves, who publicly protested against the commercialization of higher education in 2009 and 2010. In addition to the long-standing policy of encouraging participation in higher education, this tendency is now largely linked to the achievements of the Europe 2020 strategy goals and to the EU's political incentives for new Member State accession (Kahanec, Zaičeva & Zimmermann, 2010). These policies suggest that the share of the population aged 30 to 34 years with higher education degrees will be at least 40% by 2020 (Downes, 2014). According to the European Commission's (2019) statistical data, in Croatia 34.2% of people in this age group hold a higher education degree, with an unusually wide gender gap (41.9% of women versus 26.5% of men).

The options for education in rural areas are unsatisfactory, but it is estimated that leaving the rural environment is mostly related to dissatisfaction with the network of social services and the lack of cultural manifestations. Unemployment and the lack of career opportunities are recognized as among the key issues that trigger departure from the rural community (Žutinić et al., 2010). Therefore, the educational aspirations of young people in rural areas are also marked by these concerns.

In addition, attainment of a higher education degree is one of the primary pathways for the upward social and geographical mobility of young people. Their choices of higher education programs also have sociocultural and geographical impact, with consequences on both the personal (development of personal capital) and social levels (community prosperity and the development of regions) (Klepač, 2016). In other words, for youth in rural areas, it means avoiding some educational choices that are directly linked to leaving the rural environment. Rural schools create human capital that directly facilitates the development of non-rural places elsewhere (Petrin, Schaft & Meece, 2014). The situation in rural Croatia, and in particular on the islands and the coast, does not provide young people with a variety of career choices; the existing job opportunities are available mainly in the primary and tertiary sectors (Babić & Lajić, 2004), including agriculture and service jobs related to the intensive development of tourism over the last decade. Nevertheless, this should not be the reason for leaving rural areas, given that these sectors are also seeking a highly educated population that could, for example, improve agricultural production and develop tourism. It is particularly connected to the present intent of developing agrotourism as a new paradigm for sustainable tourism in rural Croatia (Vrsaljko, Turalija & Grgić, 2017), as well as the increasing focus on healthier living practices as a survival strategy for rural populations (Puđak & Bokan, 2011). In this respect, the first measure of the Rural Development Program of the Republic of Croatia 2014–2020 (NN, 2019) involves support to improve education among the agricultural population, which would impact the socioeconomic development of rural areas and the competitiveness of Croatian agriculture.

Since Croatia's entrance into the EU, young people in Croatia have experienced an increase in opportunities to participate in the common European higher education programs and the European labor market. Related to the labor market crisis in Croatia, it is interesting to see the ways in which young people in rural areas have responded to these challenges. It is possible to observe the role of education; education usually served as the primary justification behind rural migration, which indicates the vicious circle of limited rural opportunities and underdevelopment (Schaft, 2016). In addition, it should be noted that at the beginning of this century, the primary disadvantage of the Croatian education system was the outdated and overloaded curriculum (Lowther, 2004). Hence, in recent years there were initiatives focusing on significant curricular reforms at all levels of education, with an emphasis on elementary school and secondary vocational education.

This primarily involved an adjustment of educational opportunities to meet the needs of specific geographic areas and their economies, such as labor market needs and readiness for lifelong learning (NN, 2018). Likewise, there were some inequalities in access to educational resources that were influenced by sociocultural and geographic conditions and which impacted the aspirations for educational achievement and quality of life in rural areas (Agger, Meece, & Byun, 2018). For example, where a community is located impacts various aspects of education, including barriers and opportunities, emphasizing social links within the local community, schools and family. Schools play a central role in the communication of concerns and potential solutions to stakeholders in relation to schools and their students, and they can contribute to reducing inequities and improving results in the educational process (Stanić, Hren & Buzov, 2016).

School Experiences in terms of School Climate and School Professional Guidance

The high school students' experience is complex and serves as the context for this study; we explore it in relation to school climate and school professional guidance. Studies focusing on school climate emphasize that schools do not exist in isolation and are an intricate system of many parts (Cohen et al., 2009; Batarelo Kokić, Buzov & Bodlović, 2018; Konold et al, 2018; Maxwell et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013). The nature of school life is naturally influenced by the district and various community levels (local, state, and national) within which it operates. Cohen et al. (2009) suggested that the school climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. A positive school climate contributes to student participation and greater academic achievement (Thapa et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2017), while some research expands the idea of a school climate as a system that influences other aspects of the school and its stakeholders (Konold et al, 2018). School climate refers to the social characteristics of a school in terms of relationships among students and staff/faculty, the emphasis placed on learning and teaching, the values and norms, and shared approaches and practices (Thapa et al., 2013).

Student assessment of teachers' characteristics in island schools differs by the grade students are attending, where first grade students assess teachers with higher mean scores, and scores decrease as the students get older (Batarelo Kokić, Buzov & Bodlović, 2018). According to a study conducted by Maxwell et al. (2017), students' perceptions of the school climate significantly explain writing and numeracy achievement, and the outcomes are mediated by students' psychological identification within the school setting. Additionally, staff perceptions of school climate explain students' achievement on tests of numeracy, writing and reading. Furthermore, Konold et al. (2018) found that a positive school climate leads to more engaged students and results in higher academic performance.

The social and cultural background or context of the community influences the educational and professional aspirations of young people through three main environmental aspects: their local community, the family and school influences. This structural approach is based on the assumption that elements are developed not only in terms of opportunity but that there is also a set of possible constraints and self-conceptual concepts (Furlong & Biggart, 1999). Furthermore, many researchers have emphasized the strength of the relationship between educational achievement and professional aspirations and claimed that secondary school experiences significantly shape students' aspirations (Furlong & Biggart, 1999; Shah, Dwyer & Modood, 2010). Research indicates that students in rural and low-income schools found teachers to be most helpful in regards to information about their futures, compared to students in small-town and higher income schools (Griffin, Hutchins & Meece, 2011). While educational aspirations are largely influenced by parental decisions about their children's education, physical distance from educational institutions also impacts educational choices (Mookherjee, Napel & Ray, 2010). The educational system and schooling opportunities in rural environments should be adjusted to account for the needs of the local economy, and schools and educators play a significant role in the wider processes that are key to the economic development of the community (Petrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014). In addition, local educational opportunities, together with family support, are key factors influencing the aspirations and plans of high school students. In this sense, rural living areas, social conditions or the sociocultural backgrounds of young people, along with personal or family influences, as well as the school climate and school programs, are key factors that influence aspirations (Strand & Winston, 2008; Dupriez et al., 2012).

According to the above literature review, there is an existing gap in our knowledge about the influence of school experiences on rural youth and their occupational and educational expectations.

Given the existing gap, there is value in understanding the ways in which students from the rural areas of southern Croatia see their future, in their community or somewhere else, based on their estimates of the support or influence of family SES, school, educators and opportunities in the community. In the current study, while controlling primary demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, family SES), we conceptualized the school experience factors of school climate and professional guidance at school as mediators between the occupational and educational expectations of rural youth.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

Among 565 high school students (average age $M=17.14$ years, $SD=1.06$) who participated in the present study, 44.52% were male and 55.47% female. The participants were attending high school programs in the Split-Dalmatian County and were enrolled in all grades of high school. Participants were recruited at their schools and completed the prepared questionnaires within a group setting. The study was approved by the university's institutional review board and the principal of the school in which the research took place.

Instruments

The survey instrument that was used was adapted from the Rural Youth Aspirations Study (RYAS) that was developed by the National Research Center for Rural Education Support at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Petrin, Meece, & Schafft 2014). The survey instrument was adapted to the Croatian social and educational context and translated into Croatian. The version we used was first tested in a pilot study to assess, in part, its applicability to a Croatian context. The survey was administered by trained peer researchers.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to explore the primary features of high school students' views regarding aspirations for a meaningful career in the local area.

A factorial analysis was used to evaluate the influence of individual variables and their interactions.

Correlation and several multiple regression analyses were conducted to analyze the relationship between participants' attitudes towards aspirations of a meaningful career, future preferences in work and family values, school climate, professional guidance at school, gender and SES.

The scales used were translated from English for the purpose of this study and further adjusted to the characteristics of the Croatian school system context.

The *Aspirations for a meaningful career in the local area* scale consisted of 14 items that the participants rated on a 6-point scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). An exploratory factor analysis using the principal component extraction method was performed, which indicated the existence of one underlying factor that explained 42.5% of the variance. The possible range of scores on this scale was 14–84; the participants scored an average of 57.8 points (SD=13.8), which indicated moderate agreement with the statements depicting positive opinions regarding local area career opportunities. The reliability of the scale, measured using the Cronbach α coefficient, was .891, indicating a satisfactory level of reliability.

The *Future perspectives* scale consisted of 11 items that the participants rated on a 6-point scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). An exploratory factor analysis using the principal component extraction method and varimax rotation was performed, which indicated the existence of two underlying factors that together explained 44.73% of the variance. Five items loaded onto the first factor that explained 24.44% of the variance and was titled family values. The possible range of scores on this subscale was 5–30; the participants in the current study scored an average of 24.98 points (SD=4.28), which indicated a high level of agreement with the statements that showed positive family values attitudes. The reliability of this subscale, measured using the Cronbach α coefficient, was .704. The second factor explained the remaining 20.28% of the variance and was titled employment goals. The possible range of scores on this subscale was 6–36; the participants in the current study scored an average of 33.30 points (SD=5.2), which indicated a high level of agreement with the statements showing positive attitudes towards employment goals. The reliability of this subscale, measured using the Cronbach α coefficient, was .614, indicating a satisfactory, though modest, level of reliability.

The *School climate* scale consisted of 11 items that the participants rated on a 6-point scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Exploratory factor analysis using the principal component extraction method was performed, which indicated the existence of one underlying factor that explained 50.4% of the variance.

The possible range of scores on this scale was 11–66; the participants scored an average of 35.5 points ($SD=9.9$), which indicated a low level of agreement with statements showing positive opinions regarding the school climate.

The reliability of the scale, measured using the Cronbach α coefficient, was .899, indicating a satisfactory level of reliability. The *Professional guidance at school scale* consisted of 18 items that the participants rated on a 6-point scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Exploratory factor analysis using the principal component extraction method was performed, which indicated the existence of one underlying factor that explained 35.64% of the variance. The possible range of scores on this scale was 18–108; the participants in the current study scored an average of 31.31 points ($SD=10.25$), which indicated minimal agreement with statements expressing positive experiences with professional guidance. The reliability of the scale, measured using the Cronbach α coefficient, was .884, indicating a satisfactory level of reliability.

Results

Correlation analysis was the first step in investigating the relationships among the explored variables (Table 1). Results indicated a positive correlation between school climate and participants' aspirations for a meaningful career, future family values and future employment goals. Moreover, there is a positive correlation between professional guidance at school and participants' aspirations for a meaningful career, future family values and future employment goals. Furthermore, positive correlations between the participants' aspirations for a meaningful career, future family values and future employment goals were found. Finally, there is a positive correlation between the participants' aspirations for a meaningful career, gender and family SES.

Table 1: Correlation matrix for the tested variables

	v1	v2	v3	v4	v5	v6	v7
Gender (v1)	-	.036	.145**	.134**	.141**	.073	.097*
Family SES (v2)		-	.061	.219**	.127**	.003	.066
School climate (v3)			-	.463**	.238**	.222**	.237**
Professional guidance at school (v4)				-	.280**	.165**	.169**
Aspirations for a meaningful career					-	.329**	.395**
Future: family values (v6)						-	.494**
Future: employment goals (v7)							-

*p<.05; **p<.01

Next, in order to investigate the relative contributions of different demographic characteristics and school level supports to participants' attitudes towards aspirations for a meaningful career in the local area and preferences towards future family values and future employment goals, a hierarchical regression analysis was used. The analysis was performed using two demographic characteristics (gender and family SES) and school level support characteristics (school climate and professional guidance at school) as predictors. In the first step, gender and family SES were entered as predictors. In the second step, school climate and professional guidance at school were entered as the final potential predictors for the selected criterion (Table 2).

Results revealed that gender, school climate and professional guidance at school were significant predictors of aspirations for a meaningful career among rural youth (see Table 2). Results of regression analysis for aspirations for a meaningful career show that selected predictors explain a small percentage of the variance (approximately 10%), while the impact for the full-model is small (Cohen's $f^2=0.10$; Cohen, 1988). Demographic characteristics explain 2% of variance with minor impact (Cohen's $f^2=0.03$), while school level supports (school climate and professional guidance at school) do contribute, with 6% variance and a small impact (Cohen's $f^2=0.07$) on aspirations for a meaningful career among rural youth.

Table 2: Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis using Opinions towards a Meaningful Career, Family Values and Employment Goals as the Criterion

Criterion	Aspirations for a Meaningful Career	Future: Family Values	Future: Employment Goals
Predictors	β	β	β
Gender	.136**	.073	.094*
Family SES	.122**	.000	.063
Regression model	R=0.186; R ² =0.035; R ² _{adj} =0.031; F _(2,562) =10.079, p<0.000; Cohen's f ² =0.03	R=0.073; R ² =0.005; R ² _{adj} =0.002; F _(2,562) =1.523, p>0.05; Cohen's f ² =0.01	R=0.115; R ² =0.013; R ² _{adj} =0.010; F _(2,562) =3.785, p<0.05; Cohen's f ² =0.012
Gender	.093**	.037	.058
Family SES	.073	-.028	.039
School climate	.131**	.179**	.198**
Professional guidance at school	.191**	.083	.061
Regression model (final solution)	R=0.327; R ² =0.107; R ² _{adj} =0.101; F _(4,560) =16.815, p<0.000; Δ R ² =0.073; Cohen's f ² =0.07 Cohen's f ² = 0.10 (full-model)	R=0.237; R ² =0.056; R ² _{adj} =0.049; F _(4,560) =8.325, p<0.000; Δ R ² =0.051; Cohen's f ² =0.05 Cohen's f ² = 0.06 (full-model)	R=0.256; R ² =0.066; R ² _{adj} =0.059; F _(4,560) =9.838, p<0.000; Δ R ² =0.052; Cohen's f ² =0.03 Cohen's f ² = 0.061 (full-model)

** p< 0,01; * p<0,05

In the first hierarchical regression analysis, we used aspirations for a meaningful career as the criterion.

In the second hierarchical regression analysis, we used future family values as the criterion. Results revealed that professional guidance at school was the only significant predictor of preferences towards future family orientation among rural youth (see Table 2). Results of regression analysis for preferences towards future family orientation show that selected predictors explain a small percentage of the variance (approximately 6%), while the impact for the full-model is small (Cohen's f²=0.06). Demographic characteristics explain 1% of variance with minor impact (Cohen's f²=0.01), while school level supports (school climate and professional guidance at school) do contribute, with 5% variance and a small impact (Cohen's f²=0.05) on preferences towards future family orientation among rural youth.

In the third hierarchical regression analysis, we used future employment goals as the criterion.

Results revealed that professional guidance at school was the only significant predictor of preferences towards future employment goals among rural youth (see Table 2). Results of regression analysis for preferences towards future employment goals show that selected predictors explain a small percentage of the variance (approximately 6%), while the impact for the full-model is small (Cohen's $f^2=0.061$). Demographic characteristics explain 2% of variance with minor impact (Cohen's $f^2=0.012$), while school level supports (school climate and professional guidance at school) do contribute, with 4% variance and a small impact (Cohen's $f^2=0.03$) on preferences towards future family orientation among rural youth.

Discussion

The first research question focuses on the levels of perceived attitudes towards the school climate, school professional guidance, aspirations for a meaningful career and future perspectives among rural youth.

Relatively high average points on the family values subscale and visibly lower scores on the school climate and the professional guidance scale are supported by other recent research studies. In a survey by Baranović et al. (2015), the findings indicated nearly the same distribution for the influence of parents, brothers, friends, teachers and school staff on the educational and career plans of high school students. In our case, this may be related to the rural location, which often includes a lack of school counselors or less access to school counselors, and is less likely to be included in post high school graduation preparation activities, like visiting college campuses and career research, as already noted in similar research (Griffin, Hutchins & Meece, 2011). These data point to the need to improve or establish school counseling in Croatian schools, especially in rural areas. The scores on the professional guidance scale indicated that there was no adequate informational support on career opportunities in local area schools.

The second and third research question focused on the presence and direction of any relationship between demographic characteristics, school level supports and occupational and educational expectations among rural youth. The correlation analysis results indicate the presence of an association between demographic characteristics, school level supports, career aspirations and future family and employment expectations of rural youth. Furthermore, the results of regression analysis clearly indicate that the school climate does influence aspirations towards meaningful career, future family orientation and future employment goals.

In addition, aspirations towards a meaningful career are also influenced by professional guidance at school and gender.

These study findings can be related to those from previous research. Research on implementation of curriculum strategies focusing on career development among high school students in rural areas helped students attain critical knowledge of career development, enhanced their satisfaction with school and prepared them to achieve future educational and career goals (Lapan, Tucker, Kim & Kosciulek, 2003). These results can also be interpreted in relation to the importance of implementation of entrepreneurial competences in the vocational education curriculum; additionally, the current curriculum may not be in alignment with the needs of the economy and the labor market (Bohuš & Pavelić, 2011). Sustainable development of a lifelong entrepreneurial learning system requires focus on all levels of formal education within the Croatian education system (Ljubić, Heder & Batarelo Kokić, 2013).

In this context, it is important to note that many vocational education students aspire to complete the state matriculation and then enroll in higher education (Matković et al., 2013). In one of the most comprehensive youth surveys including young people that are still in school and those that recently completed their education, the participants were asked about desirable education paths, and only 23% of them selected secondary education vocational schools, while others selected tertiary education (Ilišin et al., 2013). Students have preconceived ideas that vocational education is for lower academic achievers, so that they would benefit from opportunities to experience tangible vocational occupations in practice (Hargreaves & Osborne, 2017). In this respect, there is a need for more comprehensive linking of teaching content with practical work, as well as the adaptation of teaching topics to the needs of everyday life (Ilišin & Spajić Vrkaš, 2015).

In interpreting the results of this study, one should keep in mind factors that could limit the generalizability of the results. As part of the survey study findings, the main issues were analyzed in relation to the educational and professional aspirations of rural youth, influenced by the family, the school environment and the rural community. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the survey participants lived in rural areas near a major urban center, with a developed transportation network and significant career opportunities in the urban area.

Conclusion

This study of the educational and professional aspirations of young people from rural areas in southern Croatia offers insight into the future potential trajectory of lifelong learning and future careers. The relatively high percentage of youth planning to leave the local community in Croatia has created several issues regarding the intersection of and disaggregation between education and the existing potential for development of these rural communities. Although students believe that education is important and they express aspirations towards higher education achievements, at the same time they feel their education and training has major disadvantages in relation to an unsustainable labor market compensation. Our results also point to previous conclusions indicating that pupils in developing countries, such as Croatia, have a tendency to idealize higher education, owing to lower quality and inefficiency of the educational systems (Lavrić, 2015). This finding can be linked to the mismatch between the skills students acquire at the secondary school level and labor market demands (Bartlett, 2013).

Related to that, the National Strategy for the Education of Science and Technology of the Republic of Croatia (NN, 2014) and the National Youth Program (MSPM, 2014) predict curricular reform of formal education, with an emphasis on the development of key competences related to a multifunctional set of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for personal development, social inclusion and employment. Special emphasis is placed on cooperation between schools/universities and employers. In that sense, it would be useful to harmonize high school educational programs by encouraging an adaptive and collaborative emphasis on the needs of the local/rural or regional economy--particularly because it is evident that youth want to leave the community or region with the goal of higher educational achievement, but eventually, they want to return. They express that leaving can be interpreted as a confrontation with the apparent reality that moving up means moving out (Hektner, 1995). However, a significant obstacle to the occupational expectations of youth is related to the perceived inadequacy of the education system, lack of practical skills and limited contact with work environments (OECD, 2012). On the other hand, the results of this study indicated that employment goals are significantly influenced by school climate, which means that such goals can operate through school. Therefore, curricular changes should enable professional guidance/counseling that would involve community connectivity.

Because the attitudes of high school students towards the school climate are strongly related to the determinants of a quality career and associated with their preferences towards future family values, these are significant predictors of future employment goals. Thus, the impact of the social context on professional expectations and the potential for employment in the local community can primarily be reduced to the conditions of formal education, which should be oriented toward the possibility of understanding the availability of community resources. Numerous questions about the challenges of improving education, apart from the new and more open curriculum, can be summarized in one question: What can Croatian schools do for the aspirations of young people? According to the results of our research, there should be a focus on school autonomy and support for the development of regional vocational centers linked to the interweaved connection of work and education, as announced in The Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (NN, 2014). Under conditions of financial decentralization, schools with more autonomy could better respond to the needs of the rural community and accommodate student needs in a timelier manner and with more flexibility.

Nevertheless, this study raises important questions about school choice in rural areas, where schools often face additional challenges, such as more frequent changes of teachers.

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