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## Educational and career aspirations of secondary school students in Poland and Ukraine

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### Abstract

**Research objectives and problems:** The aim of this research was to identify the educational and career aspirations of secondary school students in Poland and Ukraine. The research problem was formulated as follows: What are the educational and career aspirations of the Polish and Ukrainian students participating in the study, and are there any differences between the two groups in this regard?

**Research methods:** A quantitative research approach was applied, using the diagnostic survey method with a questionnaire technique. The participants were selected using a snowball sampling method, also known as chain sampling.

**Process of argumentation:** The paper begins with an introduction discussing the significance of educational and career aspirations in the lives of young people. The theoretical section defines the concept of aspirations and outlines the factors that influence their development. This is followed by a description of the methodology used in the author's study, including a profile of the research sample. The empirical section presents the study's findings, and the paper concludes with a summary of conclusions and recommendations.

**Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences:** The research was carried out between January 2022 and May 2023 in Poland (in the Wielkopolskie, Mazowieckie, and

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Lubelskie provinces) and Ukraine (in the Ternopil and Lviv provinces). The study sample included three groups of students (948 individuals): one group of secondary school students from Poland and two groups from Ukraine (equivalent to secondary education), surveyed both before and during the war. The findings revealed both similarities and differences in the educational aspirations of the participating adolescents. These results may serve as an inspiration for further research into the career trajectories of future generations and as the foundation for designing educational programs intended to support the development of young people's aspirations.

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:** Assisting adolescents in identifying and developing their educational and career aspirations has been one of the key challenges of secondary education. Teachers' professional efforts in this respect should aim at expanding young people's horizons and equipping them with key knowledge and skills needed to plan their future careers and adapt to a rapidly changing labor market. Educational activities should therefore be designed to help students recognize their individual aptitudes, understand the specifics of various professions, and become aware of labor market demands.

## Introduction

Choosing an educational pathway and career is one of the key decisions that every young person must make. For many adolescents, it is a difficult and stressful process. It often involves anxiety and a sense of uncertainty related to new educational prospects and, in many cases, a lack of knowledge about the current labour market, in-demand professions, or the availability of schools offering training in specific fields (Wosik-Kawala & Sarzyńska-Mazurek, 2017). One of the earliest education-related decisions takes place during the so-called "adolescent crisis" – a period when young people are seeking meaning and purpose in life. This makes it a breakthrough moment in designing their future (Gorard et al., 2012; Zawada, 2013). Defining one's educational and career aspirations in times of rapid political, economic, social and cultural change is particularly difficult, especially in the wake of the recent pandemic and the intensification of armed conflict in Ukraine.

The escalation of the war in Ukraine has led to the migration of Ukrainian citizens, primarily to EU countries, but also to the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Poland, as a country neighboring

the war zone, has played a particularly important role – especially given its long-standing status as both a workplace and residence for many Ukrainians. Among the migrants are families with school-aged children who have continued their education in Polish schools. In the 2021/2022 school year, there were approximately 350,000 refugee children of school age in Poland, of whom around 39% – that is, over 139,000 – attended Polish schools (Chrostowska, 2022). A significant proportion of these children are likely to continue their education in Polish secondary schools and have begun planning their future education and career in Poland.

The need to choose one's educational path – and consequently, a professional career – while lacking a full understanding of the social and political structure, as well as the economic, educational, and cultural realities of a foreign country is a particularly difficult task for Ukrainian adolescents. Life plans must take into account not only individual preferences, but also the expectations of the community in which the person will study and possibly work. This understanding may provide grounds for the educational role of schools in supporting students as they make informed decisions about their future educational and career paths.

### **Theoretical framework of the study**

Aspirations are among the major drivers of human action – they guide the learning process and an individual's creative pursuits, and they exert a considerable impact on innovative efforts aimed at self-improvement and shaping one's environment. Aspiration has been conceptualized as the drive to achieve set goals and realize life ideals, which in turn influence a person's life choices (Okoń, 2007; Jakimiuk, 2012). Aspirations related to the level and type of education a person wishes or intends to complete in the future are referred to as *educational aspirations* (Skorny, 1980; Bartczak, 2019). These are closely linked to *career aspirations*, which concern the future profession, working conditions, and desired job position. In view of the close relationship between educational and career aspirations, the combined term *educational and career aspirations* is also used (Sack & Szczerban, 2002).

Aspirations are dynamic and subject to change. They are determined by both personality traits and environmental influences (Bartczak, 2019). Personality-related factors include temperament, abilities, needs, and motivation. Temperament affects a person's behavior and their need for stimulation, while abilities are particularly important in determining the level of career aspirations. Motivation and aspirations are closely intertwined. Educational and career aspirations often stem from the need for self-realization – that is, the desire for personal development, success, and professional advancement – as well as the need for achievement, which encompasses both success and failure. Achievements in various tasks tend to boost aspiration levels, while repeated failures may cause them to decline (Bednarczyk-Jama, 2006).

The family environment has a significant impact on a child's level of aspirations. Significant factors include parents' educational background, economic status, lifestyle, and – crucially – their advice and personal example. Through their behaviour and values, family and child's immediate environment demonstrate to the young generation who it is worth becoming and what is worth striving for (Zaleski, 1994). A young person's aspirations are also shaped by the type, level, structure, and culture of the environments in which they live (Slany et al., 2023). The socio-economic context impacts their everyday experiences, as do observations of others and media messages, which communicate what is desirable or worth aspiring to. These cultural signals convey specific ideas and values that contribute to the formation of particular aspirations (Bednarczyk-Jama, 2006).

An important role in shaping the educational and career aspirations of children and adolescents is also played by the school environment, including the school climate, as well as student-teacher and peer relationships. Developing students' aspirations is among the educational objectives of the school, whereas responsibility for its implementation lies with teachers. In addition, peer groups have a significant influence on the aspirations of children and adolescents. They may offer support when an individual's aspirations are accepted by the group or have a negative impact when those aspirations are not approved. As a result, students are often required to modify their aspirations and make choices among

different standards and values, which frequently entails facing conflicts between their personal goals and the aspirations conveyed by their peers or teachers (Bednarczyk–Jama, 2006).

## Procedure

The aim of this study was to identify the educational and career aspirations of secondary school students in Poland and Ukraine. The main research problem was formulated as the following question: What are the educational and career aspirations of Polish and Ukrainian students participating in the study, and are there any differences between the two groups in this regard? The sample consisted of Polish and Ukrainian adolescents. It is important to note that the Ukrainian participants were surveyed while still residing in Ukraine. Since war trauma can influence one's life plans, the study was conducted in two separate groups of Ukrainian students: the first group included adolescents who participated in the study before the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022; the second group consisted of adolescents surveyed during the ongoing war.

A random purposive sampling technique was used in the study. The sampling was purposive due to the criteria of age (secondary school students) and logistics (obtaining consent from school principals in both Poland and Ukraine). It was random in the sense that participation was voluntary and anonymous. The study was carried out from 31 January to 11 April 2022 in Poland and from 15 February 2022 in Ukraine for the pre-war group. The second group of Ukrainian students was surveyed from 22 April 2023 to 25 May 2023, that is, during the war.

The research was conducted using a diagnostic survey developed by the authors. The survey was administered in both Polish and Ukrainian. The total sample included 948 students: 366 from Poland (38.61%), 453 from Ukraine before the war (47.78%), and 129 Ukrainian students surveyed during the war (13.61%). Among the respondents were 616 girls (64.98%) and 332 boys (35.03%). In the Polish group, 275 girls (75.16%)

and 91 boys (24.86%) participated. In Ukraine, the pre-war group included 279 girls (61.59%) and 174 boys (38.41%), whereas the wartime group comprised 62 girls (48.06%) and 67 boys (51.94%). Participants ranged in age from 14 to 20 years. Polish respondents were secondary school students, while Ukrainian participants were enrolled in the third level of education, which results in the acquisition of secondary education. This is a pilot, exploratory study intended as a starting point for further, more extensive research that will incorporate a representative sample.

### Study findings

Adolescents' educational aspirations, as well as their anticipated professional careers, are strongly influenced by their upbringing, which is largely guided by their personal system of values. In order to identify the hierarchy of values among the study participants, they were presented with 12 groups of values. Each respondent was asked to rank these value groups from most to least important. The most important value was assigned a score of 1, and the least important a score of 12. As a result, the lower the average score, the more highly a particular value was regarded by the respondents. The results obtained using this method made it possible to assign ranks to each group of values in the different study groups.

**Table 1. Hierarchy of values among Polish and Ukrainian adolescents participating in the study**

Values	Rank PL	Rank UK1	Rank UK 2	PL $\bar{x}$	PL SD	UK1 $\bar{x}$	UK1 SD	UK2 $\bar{x}$	UK2 SD
Allocentric	2	5	2	5.23	3.45	5.56	3.92	4.35	3.71
Educational	3	2	6	5.51	3.18	5.41	3.76	4.88	3.67
Cultural	10	8	11	7.36	3.01	6.24	3.52	5.91	3.60
Materialistic	6	4	3	6.42	3.21	5.51	4.10	4.59	3.79
Patriotism/Civic responsibility	11	11	8	7.93	3.20	6.46	3.79	5.50	3.95



Values	Rank PL	Rank UK1	Rank UK 2	PL $\bar{x}$	PL SD	UK1 $\bar{x}$	UK1 SD	UK2 $\bar{x}$	UK2 SD
Prosocial/altruistic	5	7	10	6.39	2.97	5.96	3.48	5.89	3.36
Pleasure	7	9	7	6.68	3.01	6.27	3.73	5.23	3.83
Family	1	1	1	4.96	3.97	5.25	4.29	4.18	3.98
Spiritual/religious	9	10	9	7.19	4.25	6.38	4.29	5.65	4.28
Health	4	3	5	5.78	3.41	5.48	4.15	4.66	3.94
Work-related	8	6	4	6.80	3.08	5.71	4.02	4.60	3.74
Authority-related	12	12	12	8.28	3.30	6.60	3.95	6.01	4.06

PL – Polish adolescents; UK1 – Ukrainian adolescents surveyed before the war; UK2 – Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war;  
 $\bar{x}$  – mean; SD – standard deviation

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that both Polish and Ukrainian adolescents (from both Ukrainian groups) participating in the study attributed the highest value to the family, along with the support and sense of community it provides. The second-highest ranked value for Polish adolescents and for Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war was allocentric values – such as peer relationships, friendship, and sociability. Interestingly, Ukrainian adolescents surveyed before the invasion ranked these allocentric values only in fifth place, after family, education, health, and materialistic values.

Educational values, which ranked second among the pre-war Ukrainian group, held a similar position among Polish students (3rd), but dropped to sixth place among Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war. These findings are consistent with results reported by Mamontova et al. (2023), which show that fear and anxiety resulting from ongoing armed conflict can diminish students' motivation to learn. For adolescents affected by the war, education appeared to be less of a priority than materialistic values – conceptualized as a financially secure life – which took third place in their value hierarchy. Materialistic values were also rated relatively highly by the pre-war Ukrainian group (ranked 4th). Polish students,

by contrast, placed greater importance on health (ranked 4th) and caring for others (ranked 5th) than on material security (ranked 6th).

Altruism was rated particularly low (ranked 10th) by Ukrainian students surveyed during the war. However, this same group gave considerably higher importance to patriotism – defined as love for one's homeland and concern for national interests – ranking it 8th, noticeably higher than in the other two groups. The significant differences in value systems observed between the study groups most likely reflect their differing social determinants (Bartczak, 2019), including cultural and economic distinctions between the two countries and Ukraine's current political situation. Similarities across the groups emerged in the generally lower ranking of religious, cultural, and authority-related values. To identify the differences between the compared student groups, a chi-square test of independence was used in subsequent analyses.

**Table 2. Life goals and pursuits of adolescents participating in the study**

Life goals and pursuits	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I pursue many important goals in my life that I have set for myself	221	60.38	227	61.15	92	71.32
Life sets for me goals and tasks I must fulfil	86	23.50	117	25.83	26	20.15
I haven't thought about it	42	11.48	42	9.27	10	7.75
I have no goals in life and I do not pursue anything	17	4.64	17	3.75	1	0.78
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$\chi^2 = 9.016; df = 6; p = 0.172$$

The vast majority of Polish and Ukrainian adolescents participating in the study declared that they had many important goals in life they had set for themselves. This response was given by 60.38% of respondents from Poland, 61.15% of Ukrainian respondents, and as many as 71.32% of Ukrainian respondents surveyed during the war. Nearly one in four



respondents from the Polish and pre-war Ukrainian groups – and one in five respondents surveyed during the war – believed that they had no influence over their life goals and pursuits, as many of their choices were determined by events beyond their control, which prevent them from fulfilling their life plans.

It is of considerable concern that some respondents stated they had no life goals or aspirations. This response was given by 4.64% of Polish respondents, 3.75% of Ukrainian respondents surveyed before the war, and 0.78% of those surveyed during the war. However, the analyses conducted indicate that there were no statistically significant differences between the groups in terms of life goals and pursuits. The next step in the research was to determine whether the adolescents participating in the study had clearly defined goals related to their future education.

**Table 3. Clearly defined goals of Polish and Ukrainian adolescents related to future education**

Educational goals of study participants	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
YES	110	30.05	187	41.28	48	37.21
To some extent	182	49.73	217	47.90	73	56.59
NO	74	20.22	49	10.82	8	6.20
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$\chi^2 = 27.778; df = 4; p = 0.00001$$

In every group of adolescents participating in the study, the majority were individuals with no clearly defined educational plans (49.73% of Polish respondents, 47.90% of Ukrainian respondents surveyed before the war, and 56.59% of Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war). The sample also included individuals who had no vision of their own educational path and were unable to specify any goals in this respect. Notably, the proportion of such individuals was twice as high among Polish

respondents (20.22%) compared to the two Ukrainian groups (10.82% and 6.20%, respectively). The differences between the study groups were found to be statistically significant.

The finding that 70% of Polish adolescents lack clearly defined educational plans is consistent with earlier research by Fatyga (2005), who over a decade ago observed a tendency among young people to perceive their life goals in short-term categories. This trend has been linked to the rapidly changing labour market in Poland and to the uncertainty among parents, who no longer act as clear role models in this respect. The ability to pursue one's educational goals depends on a number of factors that enable individuals to meet the expectations they set for themselves.

**Table 4. Factors influencing the attainment of educational objectives according to adolescents participating in the study**

Factors influencing the attainment of educational objectives	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Perseverance in attaining goals, diligence	79	21.59	170	37.53	44	34.11
Self-confidence	73	19.95	67	14.79	17	13.18
Family support	63	17.22	66	14.57	34	26.36
Innate predispositions or capabilities	45	12.30	39	8.60	10	7.75
Friends' support	41	11.20	8	1.77	5	3.88
Finances	35	9.57	51	11.26	16	12.40
Environmental pressure	13	3.56	8	1.77	0	0
Proximity from home to educational institutions	10	2.74	4	0.88	2	1.55
Low academic demands	5	1.37	8	1.77	1	0.78
Other (e.g., time, ambitions, motivation, teacher support, etc.)	2	0.55	32	7.06	0	0
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$\chi^2 = 111.905; df = 18; p = 0.000$$

According to the largest number of Ukrainian respondents from both groups (37.53% and 34.11%, respectively), the key factor determining the attainment of educational goals is perseverance and diligence in pursuing the set objective. This view is shared by 21.59% of Polish students. Almost one in five Polish participants indicated that self-confidence (19.95%) and family support (17.22%) are important in helping to achieve educational plans. The belief that self-confidence is a decisive factor in reaching educational objectives was reported by considerably fewer Ukrainian students – 14.79% of those surveyed before the war and 13.18% during the war.

The importance of family support in achieving educational goals was most often reported by the group of Ukrainian adolescents surveyed during the war (26.36%). A notable difference between the three study groups was found in relation to reliance on friends. Among Polish respondents, (11.20%) believed that friends may facilitate the attainment of educational objectives. This opinion was expressed by far fewer Ukrainian students from both groups (1.77% and 3.88%, respectively). The differences between the study groups were found to be statistically significant. A similar proportion of students from each group (around 10%) believed that the implementation of educational plans depends on financial resources. In view of these findings, it is of interest to examine the plans of the adolescents participating in the study after completing their current level of schooling.

**Table 5. Plans of adolescents participating in the study after graduating from their current school**

Plans of adolescents after completing secondary school	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pursuing higher education	149	40.71	239	52.76	61	47.29
Starting a job in their home country	25	6.83	11	2.43	3	2.33
Starting a job abroad	23	6.28	12	2.65	4	3.10

Plans of adolescents after completing secondary school	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Starting a job and continuing education	73	19.95	97	21.41	36	27.91
Starting a family	23	6.28	0	0	1	0.78
Acquiring professional skills as quickly as possible (courses, training programs, post-secondary schools)	19	5.19	22	4.86	6	4.65
Don't know yet	32	8.74	46	10.16	14	10.86
Taking at least one year off	13	3.55	6	1.32	4	3.10
Other	9	2.46	20	4.41	0	0
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$x^2 = 72.11; df = 16; p = 0.000$$

The largest group of Polish (40.71%) and Ukrainian adolescents (52.76% of those surveyed before the war and 47.29% during the war) plan to pursue higher education after graduating from secondary school. A relatively large proportion of respondents indicated that they intend to begin working while continuing their education. This vision of the future was reported by 19.95% of Polish adolescents, 21.41% of Ukrainian adolescents surveyed before the war, and 27.91% of those surveyed during the war. The study also included respondents who were unsure about their future plans: 8.74% of Polish students, 10.16% of Ukrainian students surveyed before the war, and 10.86% of those surveyed during the war stated that they did not yet know what decisions they would make concerning their future. As part of the study, the authors also examined the motivations that drive young people in making decisions about continuing their education.

**Table 6. Motivations for continuing education among respondents**

Reasons for continuing education	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Mastering in-demand professional skills	112	30.60	103	22.74	36	27.91
Becoming independent	103	28.14	166	36.65	47	36.43
Broadening knowledge, interests and skills	95	25.96	115	25.39	24	18.60
Meeting parents' expectations	23	6.29	35	7.73	14	10.85
Socializing with	20	5.46	2	0.44	1	0.78
Not planning to continue education	7	1.91	6	1.33	3	2.33
Other	6	1.64	26	5.74	4	3.10

$$\chi^2 = 47.225; df = 12; p = 0.000$$

The respondent groups also differ in terms of their motivations for continuing education. For the largest group of Polish respondents (30%), the most important reason to continue education is the desire to acquire attractive professional skills. In contrast, for Ukrainian students, the main motivation is the desire to become independent (36% in both Ukrainian groups). Becoming independent also motivates 28.14% of Polish respondents to continue their education, whereas nearly one-fourth of Ukrainian students are driven by the goal of gaining professional skills in order to secure good employment.

Slightly more than 25% of Polish and Ukrainian respondents (surveyed before the war) reported that an important motivation for continuing their education is the opportunity to expand their knowledge and develop their interests and skills. This reason was indicated by a smaller proportion of Ukrainian respondents surveyed during the war (18.60%). A similar number of respondents from all study groups reported that they are motivated to continue their education to meet their parents' expectations. Choosing a career path is one of the hardest life decisions and may be facilitated by consulting with various stakeholders.

**Table 7. Stakeholders consulted by adolescents  
when planning their education**

Stakeholders consulted by adolescents when planning their education	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Parents	113	30.88	248	54.75	89	69.00
I make decisions on my own	81	22.13	135	29.80	23	17.83
Peers	88	24.04	13	2.87	4	3.10
Siblings	37	10.11	11	2.43	3	2.33
Grandparents	23	6.29	2	0.44	1	0.78
Romantic partner (boyfriend/girlfriend) or acquaintances	3	0.82	30	6.62	4	3.10
Psychologist	13	3.55	7	1.54	0	0
Career counsellor	6	1.64	7	1.54	3	2.33
School counsellor	2	0.55	0	0	2	1.56
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$\chi^2 = 220.476; df = 16; p = 0.000$$

The groups of students compared in the study differ significantly in terms of seeking support when choosing their further education. More than half of Ukrainian students (54.74% of those surveyed before the war and 69% during the war) reported consulting their educational plans with their parents, whereas only 30.88% of Polish respondents considered their parents' opinions in this regard. Similar findings were reported by Chepil and Sarzyńska-Mazurek (2023) in their study involving Ukrainian university students. Nearly one-fourth of Polish respondents seek advice about educational opportunities from their peers, whereas among Ukrainian students, this was reported by only around 3%.

A relatively large proportion of students from each group (22.13% of Polish respondents, 29.80% of Ukrainians surveyed before the war, and 17.83% during the war) do not consult their decisions with anyone and make choices about their educational future independently. Similar



results were obtained in all study groups concerning consultation with professionals responsible for educational guidance. It was found that such stakeholders do not enjoy the trust of the respondents in matters for which they are formally appointed.

**Table 8. School initiatives to support students  
in planning further education**

Modes of assistance	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Schools offer no assistance with further education choices	246	67.22	286	63.13	55	42.64
Consultations with class tutor	52	14.21	52	11.48	15	11.63
Meetings with career counsellor	26	7.11	19	4.19	29	22.48
Meetings with representatives of different professions	24	6.56	61	13.47	27	20.93
Meetings with school counsellor	9	2.46	18	3.97	0	0
Meetings with psychologist	9	2.46	17	3.75	3	2.33
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$\chi^2 = 80.137; df = 10; p = 0.000$$

The largest group of Polish students (67.22%) and Ukrainian students surveyed before the war (63.13%) declared that their school does not offer any support or assistance in choosing further education. This view was also expressed by 42.64% of Ukrainian students surveyed during the war. Only a small number of Polish respondents reported that their schools provided support through chats with class tutors (14.21%), meetings with career counsellors (7.11%), or encounters with representatives of various professions (6.56%). A slightly more favorable situation was observed among Ukrainian students. Those surveyed before the war declared participating in meetings with professionals (13.47%) and having discussions with their class tutor on this topic (11.48%).

Interestingly, Ukrainian respondents surveyed during the war rated their schools more positively in terms of fulfilling the task of supporting students in their educational planning. Many of them confirmed that their schools had organized meetings with career counsellors (22.48%) and with representatives of different professions (20.93%). The differences observed between the groups were statistically significant.

**Table 9. Frequency of reflecting upon one's future career**

How often do you think about your future career	Polish adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents		Ukrainian adolescents during the war	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very often (1)	99	27.05	128	28.26	37	28.68
Fairly often (2)	101	27.60	133	29.36	42	32.56
Difficult to say (3)	109	29.78	129	28.48	36	27.91
Hardly ever (4)	49	13.39	47	10.38	10	7.75
Never (5)	8	2.19	16	3.53	4	3.10
Total	366	100	453	100	129	100

$$\chi^2 = 3.265004; df = 4; p = 0.51450$$

The analyses show that the vast majority of respondents reflect on their future careers. Only a few reported not planning their careers at all or doing so only rarely. No statistically significant differences were found between the student groups participating in the study.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The study revealed that, although some differences exist between the groups in relation to their educational pathways and career plans, Polish and Ukrainian adolescents place a high value on education and show similar patterns in terms of educational aspirations. The majority of respondents expressed a desire to pursue higher education, which they associate

with the opportunity to secure their dream job and gain independence. These results correspond to findings by Roguska and Antas-Jaszczuk (2017), which indicate that young people from Poland, Latvia, and Belarus feel the need to plan for their future. The present findings also correspond to those of Długosz (2017), who showed that Polish and Ukrainian students have very similar career plans and generally intend to continue their education beyond secondary school. Furthermore, the finding that students consider their future education and careers to be dependent mainly on their own efforts and diligence in acquiring knowledge and skills supports the conclusions of Antas-Jaszczuk, Roguska, Loboda, and Davidova (2024).

However, it should be noted that a majority of respondents from both countries lack clearly defined educational and career plans. This result mirrors findings by Łuczak (2022), who found that nearly half of the 1,337 students in her study did not attach importance to their educational and career goals and were willing to revise or abandon them if they proved unattainable. Undoubtedly, being aware of one's educational goals, having the ability to define them, and working to achieve them influences an individual's sense of purpose, self-realization, and vision for the future. At the same time, the ability to adapt and modify one's goals may become a valuable skill in the modern labour market.

Ukrainian students participating in the study consult their educational choices primarily with their parents, whereas the Polish respondents, in addition to their parents' opinions, place high value on the views of their peers. A considerable number of respondents reported making decisions about their further education independently. However, young people often need guidance – particularly given the complexities of the modern labour market (Sarżyńska-Mazurek, 2018). It is therefore essential that students' preferences and intentions regarding their future careers are supported, adjusted, or refined by professionals – namely, educational and career counsellors. However, the findings of this study indicate that individuals responsible for providing educational support do not play a key role in the educational and career decision-making of Polish and Ukrainian adolescents.

In light of this, schools and career counsellors should assume responsibility for guiding young people through the process of exploring,

evaluating, and matching their personal interests, talents, and physical and mental capabilities with real-world opportunities and labour market demands. This is particularly important given that the majority of respondents frequently reflect on their future careers – a tendency that can be seen as an outcome of the educational process. Designing a life plan is a challenging and long-term endeavor. Therefore, career guidance and counseling should be implemented in a thoughtful, systematic, and thorough manner (Parzęcki, 2004).

In the case of students migrating from Ukraine, schools should be required to provide psychological support, as many of these young people have experienced trauma as a result of the ongoing war. This support should primarily focus on identifying the often-hidden needs of children and adolescents and providing a constructive, sensitive response (Rafał-Łuniewska, 2022). In order to act as effective guides in the educational process, schools must ensure that students feel safe, accepted, and respected – including respect for their choices – and that they are enthusiastically encouraged to take responsibility for their own futures (Ahmed et al., 2021). At the same time, teachers must acknowledge and respect the cultural distinctiveness of Ukrainian students, which undoubtedly affects the development of their aspirations.

The study highlights a pressing social issue: the difficulty faced by young people who are compelled to plan their futures amid a highly unpredictable reality. The findings may serve as a basis for designing effective educational policies and vocational support programs for adolescents. They may also assist policymakers in Poland and Ukraine in gaining a deeper understanding of young people's needs and in adapting the education system to meet labour market demands. We hope that the issues raised in this article will inspire further research – also in other disciplines – into the challenges faced by adolescents in today's uncertain and rapidly changing world.

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