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# THE LANDSCAPE IN THE INFORMAL EDUCATION OF THE YOUNGEST. A CASE STUDY

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### Abstract

The European Landscape Convention, adopted in 2000, aims to promote the protection, management and planning of landscapes and to organise cooperation on landscape-related issues. Countries that ratified the Convention undertook to introduce activities that would promote public education on the subject. In Poland, the Ministry of Education has identified schools as the place to implement these priorities. In the core curriculum of general education for primary schools, «creating opportunities to learn about the components of the landscape» was prescribed as the primary objective of the subject of nature. Although the school should play a leading role in the implementation of these tasks, even in its most elaborate form it is unable to meet all the needs. It should be complemented by non-formal education, which goes beyond the school curriculum and is a kind of its extension. This article is an attempt to present and evaluate the author's educational project dealing with the topic of cultural landscape at the regional level.

### Key words

informal education, regional education, cultural landscape, arcaded houses, windmills, Vistula Delta

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## 1. Introduction

In Polish law, a brief definition of the cultural landscape can be found in article 3 point 14 of the Act on the Protection of Monuments (Ustawa..., 2003). Yet, there is a considerable diversity of views on its understanding in the literature. This depends on the scientific perspective of the person using the term. It is used in geographical, cultural-anthropological, art-historical, architectural and urban planning terms. The final definition may depend on the research context, but in general, the cultural landscape is understood as a complex system where human culture and the natural environment interact to create a unique space. The

values of a cultural landscape are its physiognomic features (appearance, image of the area) resulting from the use of natural conditions to create cultural values, and the intangible knowledge of the society that created this landscape.

In formal education, the concept of landscape is primarily associated with geography and natural science. In this subject, pupils acquire knowledge about the diversity of landscapes on Earth, their formation, evolution and human influence on the shaping of the environment. Geography at the school level includes the study of natural and man-made landscapes. U. Myga-Piątek, trying to diagnose contemporary education even before the

last curricular changes in 2017–2018, stressed that “the (...) directions of scientific research on landscape (including cultural landscape) are not represented in school geography, and the curricula are dominated by the traditional, even popular way of treating landscape exclusively as a physiognomy of space” (Myga-Piątek, 2008, p. 233). Attempts have been made to fill this gap by changing the core curriculum of geography in primary schools, including, among other things, teaching about the geographical and cultural features of ‘small homelands’ in the scope of knowledge to be acquired by pupils in grades I–VIII (Hibszner et al., 2017). Nevertheless, as J. Rodzoś notes in her analysis of current problems of Polish geographic education at its different stages (Rodzoś, 2022), the broad, multidisciplinary nature of the subject, which brings together knowledge of almost all elements of the environment and human activity, is a source of the problem. According to her, the huge scope of geographical content present in school education leads to superficiality of education. Despite the assurances of the reform authors that the two-part construction of the programme’s provisions with the division into ‘educational content’ and ‘specific requirements’ is supposed to provide teachers with the possibility to choose information, select educational methods and forms of work with students (Szkurłat et al., 2018, p. 16), the ways of presenting topics related to the cultural landscape specified in the core curriculum “in the form of a multimedia presentation, a poster, a film, a photographic exhibition on the attractiveness of the ‘small homeland’ as a place of residence and economic activity (...) created on the basis of information retrieved from various sources” (Hibszner et al., 2017, pp. 19, 21) may lead to certain simplifications and be insufficient in the educational process. However, it should be borne in mind that alongside the traditional formal framework of schooling, there are also educational processes and experiences that are characterised by a more relaxed and spontaneous approach to learning in the contemporary world, falling under the common classification of ‘informal education’, and they can be an excellent complement to the formal mode of learning.

## 2. Formal and informal education

The concept of ‘non-formal education’ began to be widely used in the context of new educational theories and practices in the second half of the 20th century. The idea grew out of the recognition that the process of learning is not only linked to

formal educational institutions, such as schools or universities. As educational research progressed, realisation came that people also acquire knowledge and skills through life experiences, social interactions and a variety of activities outside the traditional classroom. J. Dewey, in his work *Democracy and Education*, first published in 1916 (Dewey, 1916), noted the increasing failure of the traditional school to keep pace with the changes in a dynamic society and the disconnect between formal instruction and real-world action (Dewey, 1963, p. 210). In the field of children’s non-formal education, researchers who have influenced practice include J. Holt, an American educator who, in the 1970s, drew attention to the importance of independent learning, especially through natural exploration and discovery of the world in everyday settings (Holt, 2007), or M. Montessori, an Italian doctor and educator, creator of the method that bears her name, who emphasised independence and exploration as fundamental elements of children’s education (Montessori, 2014).

The rudimentary characteristics of this type of education are: the lack of a formal framework and structure, which means that it can take many forms, such as: out-of-school activities, workshops, group meetings or even activities that take place in everyday life; spontaneity and unplanned learning; flexibility and personalisation of the educational process, adapting to the individual needs of the learner; diverse teaching methods, using a variety of elements, such as games, discussions, practical experiences or social interactions; active involvement of participants; informal timeframe (Leśniewska, 2016, p. 116). In informal education, landscape learning takes flexible and interactive forms based on workshops (including fieldwork), environmental education, community projects or educational games. This topic was discussed in the context of the current European Landscape Convention by B. Castiglioni (2009), who presented several international activities for informal landscape education, such as the Slovenian Landscape Association’s project *We are making our landscape* (2004–2005), the activities of the Catalan Landscape Observatory under the aegis of the Generalitat de Catalunya, or the Italian 3KCL – Karstic Cultural Landscapes project of the Montebelluna Museum of Natural History and Archaeology.

In Poland, the issues of landscape education are mainly addressed in the context of successive educational reforms and the discussion of school curricula (Hibszner, Szkurłat, 2018; Komorowska, 2008), although the outlines of the methodology of landscape education were already outlined in



the 1950s by A. Chałubińska (1959) and at the end of the 20th century by S. Piskorz (ed. 1995). At the same time, research has been conducted to test the effectiveness of teaching children and young people by determining the level of familiarity with the phenomenon among students (Dylikowa, 1990; Piechota, 2009; Syrek, 2021). The presentation of informal activities involving landscape issues has been presented in the works of A. Młynarczuk-Sokołowska (2016) and M. Koperska-Kośmicka (2019b), among others.

### 3. Objective

The aim of this article is to present and analyse the author's educational project focused on informal landscape education for children, with particular emphasis on the cultural landscape of the Żuławy Wiślane region. The author attempts to show how art workshops can make up for the deficiencies of formal education, especially in the context of cultural landscape, and to present the benefits that awakening children's interest in local heritage and forming their bonds with the environment can bring from an early age.

### 4. Informal landscape education for children. Description of the method

This educational project can be categorised as an alternative, extracurricular form of education to

support regional education, develop a sense of regional identity and strengthen links with the local landscape. Its main task is to familiarise participants with the geographical specificity of the region, including the history of settlements and traditional architecture. It is divided into three stages, each of which can be completed independently – participation in or knowledge of all parts is not required.

The starting point of the project was an interactive publication for children *Raptularz Żuławski czyli sekretny dziennik poszukiwacza skarbów* (Koperska-Kośmicka, 2019a), which was created within the framework of a monograph on the historical architecture of the Żuławy Wiślane region (Koperska-Kośmicka, 2020). Since children are a more demanding audience than adults, but also an audience that loses interest in the presented topic more quickly, the booklet had to be a kind of synthesis of the news found in the book for adult readers. A synthesis presented in a simple, clear and accessible way.

The graphic form of the whole book was determined by the title – the word 'raptularz', according to the PWN Polish language dictionary, means a book or a booklet for handwritten notes on various news, events, anecdotes, etc., a collection of notes, a kind of travel diary, and so the whole book follows the convention of free monochrome drawings that gradually bring the reader closer to the theme of the landscape, region and cultural heritage (Fig. 1).

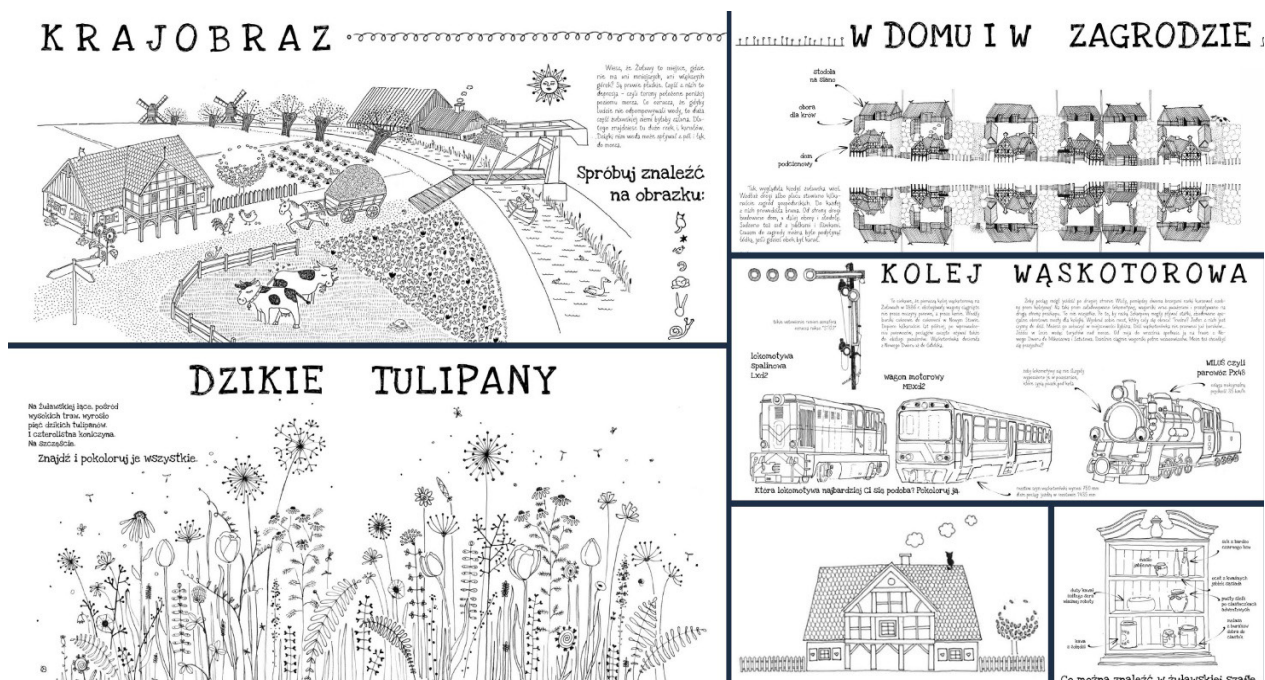


Fig. 1. Sample pages of children's book *Raptularz żuławski*.  
Source: Koperska-Kośmicka, 2019.

Every two adjacent pages form a whole, presenting a given theme in the form of puzzles or interactive tasks. The book ends with a map of the most famous sights in the Żuławy region and a diploma for 'discoverers of the treasures of the Vistula Delta'. Each pair of pages begins with an introduction to the characteristic elements of the landscape, followed by information on natural and semi-natural elements, and then elements of the built environment (settlement structures, farms,

houses, technical monuments, or elements of interior design). A part of the booklet is devoted to non-material heritage: old crafts, regional cuisine or clothing. The publication was distributed free of charge to local libraries and institutions, and this fairly widespread availability meant that it was used to promote the region in classes by external institutions, including the Żuławy Historical Park, as well as by primary school teachers, who, use it most often in grades 1–3, due to its simplified form (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Use of *Raptularz...* by external institutions (Żuławy Historical Park).  
Source: M. Koperska-Kośmicka.

In parallel with the preparation of the publication, the idea of creating two scenarios for children's workshops was born, presenting the most characteristic forms of buildings found in Żuławy: arcaded houses and windmills (quite common in the Vistula Delta until the Second World War). They have been grouped under the similar names 'colourful arcades' and 'colourful windmills, Żuławy's neighbours in Gdańsk', and have a common graphic design with the book. The premise of the workshop is learning while working. During a two-and-a-half hour session, children and their parents/guardians assemble wooden models of buildings: arcaded houses or windmills, which they then decorate with acrylic paints and other materials. The workshop is preceded by a 15-minute presentation about the landscape and the type of building being developed, using illustrations from the book (Fig. 3). It deals with issues relating to the cultural landscape of the region, elements of timber architecture, characteristic details, materials and colours. It describes in detail the peculiarities of the

construction technique, including timber-frame construction, and the customs associated with the construction and use of the buildings.

## 5. Results

Over the three years of the project – the first workshop was organised in cooperation with the Institute of Urban Culture in Gdansk in February 2020 – 338 participants, including 204 children and 134 carers, took part in 11 sessions. The workshops were organised with the help and participation of six institutions: The Office of the Marshal of the Pomeranian Voivodeship, thanks to which the *Raptularz...* was made possible, the aforementioned Institute of Urban Culture in Gdańsk, where two editions of the workshop were held within the framework of the «Open IKM» micro-grants, the Pomeranian Chamber of Architects of the Republic of Poland, the Traugutt Association, the Żuławy Historical Park during the Night of Museums, and the Library of Żuławy, subsidised by the Ministry

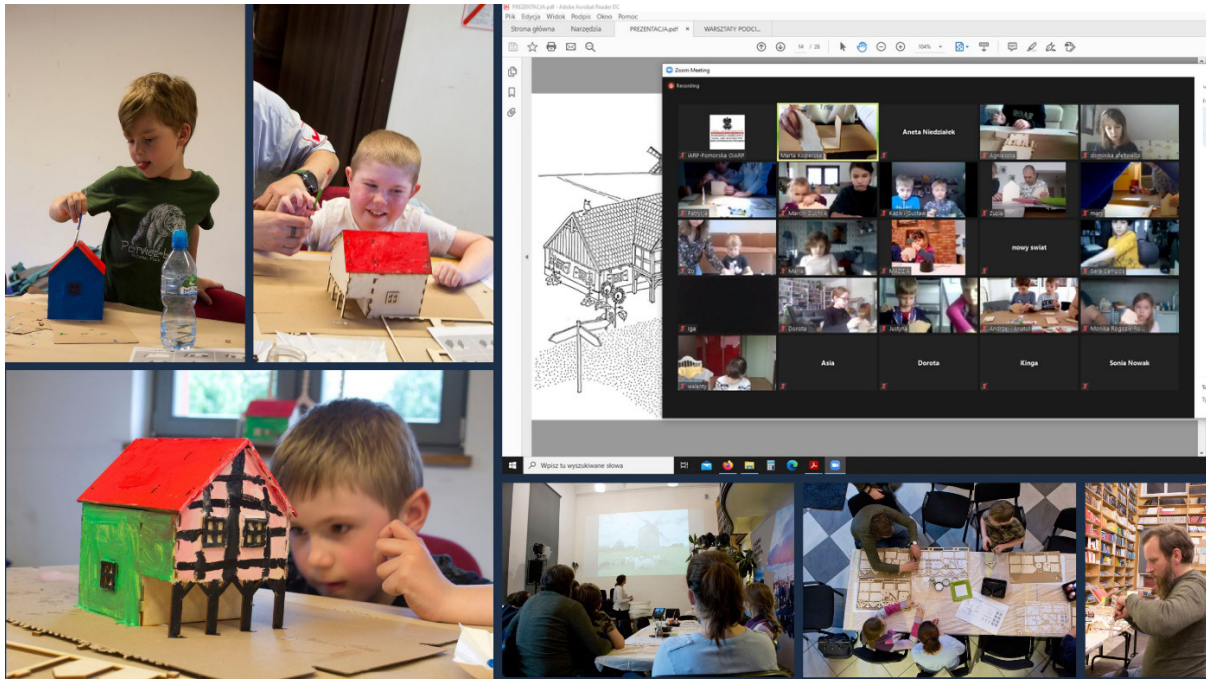


Fig. 3. Traditional and online forms of workshops.  
Source: M. Koperska-Kośmicka.

of Culture and National Heritage as part of the implementation of the National Programme for the Development of Reading 2.0 for 2021–2025.

The meetings were organised as extracurricular activities. Participation was voluntary and free, registration was done by filling in forms on the organisers' websites, and admission was on a first-come, first-served basis. Active participants – i.e. children – were provided with 30x50 digitally cut birch plywood models and additional materials: glue, acrylic paints in primary colours, water, basic tools: scissors, brushes and an information booklet based on the publication, as well as instructions for making the work. In addition, the workshop leader gave a real-time demonstration of how to assemble the model and, in parallel, gave individual instructions on request. The time of the meeting was divided into four parts: discussion of the elements of the Vistula Delta landscape – 15 minutes, glueing the model according to strict instructions, a 45-minute stage, and individual work, including free decoration of the finished building – 60 minutes. After all the above activities were completed, there was a short 15-minute presentation of the work, during which the participants discussed what they had done. In the case of online meetings, the presentation of the results took the form of an online exhibition on the organiser's website (Pomeranian IARP). The majority of the works were successfully digitised, which enabled developing a typology of the most common cultural landscape elements in the models created and analysing their frequency of occurrence (cf. Table 1).

Despite the rather open formula of the second part of the workshop – the children were completely free to finish and decorate the models – the results were characterised by a good assimilation of the information presented in the introduction, the awakening of curiosity about construction techniques or the possibility of self-expression and learning creative techniques. A characteristic motif of a large number of works was the repetition of construction elements and the identification of traditional materials and the historical colouring of roofs and walls (Fig. 4).

The inclusion of foundation inscriptions in the solutions, which were mentioned in the introduction when discussing traditional Żuławy buildings was an interesting element. Landscape components appeared less frequently, but were also present, especially when participants were given a free hand in developing the narrative during the online meetings, as a result of the unlimited time allocated to the task. In such cases, elaborate landscape scenes often appeared, with additional elements in the form of trees, watercourses, other historical buildings or technical infrastructure (bridges), small architecture (wells, fences, ladders) or livestock (Fig. 5).

The landscape components presented in the children's works can be divided into two groups: natural elements and those related to construction. Due to the nature of the workshop and the facilitator's experience, those related to traditional architecture predominated.

Tab. 1. Analysis of motifs appearing in the works created during the workshops.

	IKM workshop	IARP workshop	ŻPN workshop	TRAUGUTT	LIBRARY	SHARE %
CHILDREN/PARENTS	(27/23)	(140/90)	(10/9)	(12/10)	(15/2)	
Total landscape elements	5	56	3	4	4	
Trees	0	12	0	0	0	6%
Other Plants	3	25	2	2	3	17%
Water Elements	0	5	0	1	0	3%
Animals	2	10	1	1	1	7%
Historical Building	0	4	0	0	0	2%
Total Architect elements	52	262	35	24	27	
Structure	12	65	8	3	4	45%
Window/Door Decoration	16	83	11	8	11	63%
Foundation Inscriptions	2	5	1	2	1	5%
Traditional Materials	12	37	7	6	6	33%
Traditional colouring	10	72	8	5	5	49%

Source: M. Koperska-Kośmicka.



Fig. 4. Final results of the workshops.

Source: M. Koperska-Kośmicka.

## 6. Conclusions

The authors of the recent core curriculum reform, commenting on the results of the changes carried out so far, note that in the older grades of primary school landscape education is abandoned in favour of learning about selected problems of the geographical environment (Hibszner et al., 2018, p. 36). Analysing the role of cultural landscape in school geographic education after 2018, A.

Awramiuk-Godoń (2019) even more emphatically emphasises that «in the context of landscape education, the introduced changes have actually changed little, (...) and contemporary landscape research currents are represented in school to a negligible extent». Among the many sources of the deepening crisis in geography teachers' education in Poland, a decline in the level of school geography is indicated (Szkurlat et al., 2023). A study by D. Syrk (2021) showed a number of doubts about the role of landscape education in Polish school.



Fig. 5. Additional landscape elements in the work created during online workshops.  
Source: M. Koperska-Kośmicka.

Thus, Komorowska's observations that issues related to landscape and regionalism constitute a small part in relation to the whole range of content taught in primary school (Komorowska, 2008) seem to be still valid, but as the analysis of the conducted informal activities showed – there is a possibility to expand in the field of cultural landscape education during other, additional classes.

The workshop on regional architecture, which was the basis of the project, allowed the children to notice, define and present in a visual form the elements of the local cultural landscape. Participation in the workshops is helpful in creating links with their small homeland and allows them to identify with the local landscape. Analysing and interpreting the children's work provides information about the ways in which they process the surrounding world. The project not only introduces the children to the world of local heritage, but also stimulates their creative expression and involvement in the educational process. Participation in the workshops not only allows for a better understanding and definition of the elements of the cultural landscape, but also fosters the formation of emotional connections with the surrounding environment. In the context of non-formal education, the project seems to be a successful example of how children can be involved in the learning process through activity, interaction and creative action.

## 7. Limitations

The presented workshops, belonging to the current of informal education, in their main part refer to elements of the built landscape and put the greatest emphasis on traditional construction of only one region of Poland – the Vistula River Delta. The timeframe of the classes is not conducive to an in-depth analysis by the participants of the other components of the landscape, but nevertheless some of the components of the environment discussed in the introduction find expression in the presented works. This is particularly evident in the mock-ups made during the online meetings, when the lack of time constraints allowed for a free continuation of the narrative built around the models created.

Looking to the future, it is worth considering developing similar initiatives that integrate cultural and landscape education with practical, creative activities. In this way, gaps in formal education can be effectively filled and the development of sustainable, culturally aware communities can be supported. Such projects can serve as an inspiration for other regions, emphasising the importance of forming a bond with local heritage from an early age.

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