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The structure of Polish education, based on Jędrzejewicz's reforms: its indisputable benefits and critical voices

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Abstract

In autumn 1931, work on an educational reform had commenced, which ended in March of the following year with the passing of the Act on the Education System of 11 March 1932. The reform in question addressed the organisational system of education, methodological and curricular issues (including the content of textbooks and teaching resources), the role of schools in the development of children (implemented by teachers), as well as various aspects of school administration (including guidelines, courses offered, and teacher training institutions). This paper presents an overview of the measures undertaken as part of the reform of the education system and the structure of schools.

Keywords

interwar period, Jędrzejewicz reform, school system

1. Introduction

Important changes in the education system took place in the territories that were later to become incorporated into the Second Polish Republic (especially in the areas under Russian control) as early as during World War I. The Temporary Committee of the Provisional Council of State of the Kingdom of Poland played a special role in this.¹ However, the proper transformation process of the Polish educational system did not begin until the country regained its independence. This was initiated by Jędrzej Moraczewski's government and sworn in by Józef Piłsudski on 17 November 1918.² On 12 August 1931, Janusz Jędrzejewicz assumed the position of Minister of Religious Beliefs and Public Enlightenment.

The Act on the Education System of 11 March 1932 regulated matters concerning the organisation and functioning of kindergartens, common schools and secondary schools. It also addressed basic issues concerning higher education. As F. Śliwiński observed, some of the goals ascribed to the education system were the upbringing and development of resourceful citizens of the Republic of Poland, conscious of their rights and obligations towards the state, which required the provision of appropriate religious, moral, mental and physical education to prepare students as best as possible for later life, as well as enabling the most talented individuals from all walks of life to attain the highest level of academic and vocational education. That role was found in the entire system of education, at every single stage: from kindergarten to higher education institutions.³

Pursuant to the Act on the Education System of 11 March 1932, schools were divided into state schools (maintained by the state), public schools (maintained by the state jointly with local governments or self-governing business organisations) and private schools (owned by associations, institutions or private individuals). State schools could be established and maintained by the Ministry of Religious Beliefs and Public Enlightenment, but also, for example, by the Ministry of Transport (railway schools), the Ministry of the Interior (vocational and occupational health and safety schools) and the Ministry of Military Affairs

¹ M. Pęcherski, M. Świątek, *Organizacja oświaty w Polsce w latach 1917–1969. Podstawowe akty prawne*, PWN, Warszawa 1972, pp. 23–24.

² F. W. Araszkiewicz, *Szkoła średnia ogólnokształcąca w Polsce w latach 1930–1932*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich Wydawnictwo PAN, Wrocław–Warszawa 1972, pp. 13–16; S. I. Możdżeń, *Historia wychowania 1918–1945*, Wydawnictwo Stachurski, Kielce 2000, p. 71.

³ F. Śliwiński, *Zasady nowego ustroju szkolnictwa polskiego*, Książnica Atlas, Lwów–Warszawa, b.r., pp. 4–7.

(military schools). Public schools included common schools, rural community schools of agriculture and supplementary vocational schools. These were maintained from state funds and the funds of local governments of rural and urban municipalities. Private schools, in turn, were divided into: local government schools (district and municipal schools, maintained exclusively from local government funds), community schools (maintained by various types of educational associations and social institutions) and strictly private schools (privately owned by individuals). Depending on the age of the students and the scope of education provided, schools were classified into lower schools (common schools, supplementary vocational schools, lower vocational schools), middle schools (lower secondary and secondary schools, vocational lower secondary schools), and higher education institutions (universities, technical universities, academies). In addition, these institutions were also divided into male, female and co-educational schools.⁴

2. Education system

2.1. Pre-school institutions in the education system

The Act defined kindergartens as educational institutions for children from the age of 3 until the starting age of compulsory education. They provided childcare for children whose working parents were unable to take care of them full time, but also provided an opportunity for children to interact with their peers. Kindergartens also provided physical and mental education under appropriate conditions, including breathing exercises, music and movement classes, sensory training, handicrafts, drawing, as well as exercises involving telling stories, observing and describing objects and phenomena. One of the tasks of pre-school institutions was also to instil moral principles as well as nurture religious, social and humanitarian consciousness and sensitivity. Children attending these institutions were divided into two groups, not based on their age but on their development. Some of the highlighted aspects of the education process were to take into account the children's interests and level of ability, as well as to gradually increase the complexity of the tasks.⁵

⁴ F. Śliwiński, *Zasady nowego ustroju szkolnictwa polskiego*, pp. 7–8.

⁵ Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 1932 r. o ustroju szkolnictwa, Dz. U. 1932 r. Nr 38, poz. 389.

2.2. First, second and third level common schools

The basic organisational institution in the new education system was the seven-year common school. The seven-year compulsory education system was adopted, starting from the beginning of the school year in which the child turns seven years old. The Minister of Religious Beliefs and Public Enlightenment had the right to extend the duration of compulsory education to eight years or shorten it to six years in individual areas or municipalities for organisational reasons. In the case of physically or mentally retarded children or due to restricted access to a common school, compulsory education could also be postponed. Children who had not yet been enrolled in compulsory education and who had reached the age of six could be admitted to public common schools, provided that they had acquired an adequate physical and mental development level (confirmed by a physician specialising in the field), and provided that there were places available at a given school. On the other hand, children with abnormal development could be exempted from compulsory education if there was no special school in the area. Compulsory education could be pursued at a public common school, another type of school (e.g. a private school) or at home, albeit there were certain conditions imposed on the latter by the Ministry of Religious Beliefs and Public Enlightenment. Common schools offered three stages of education: the first included elementary general education, the second built on and expanded the knowledge acquired during the first, while the third stage was additionally intended to foster the development of young students in social, moral and economic terms. In terms of organisation, common schools were divided into three levels: 1st level schools implemented the basic curriculum along with the most important curricular components of the second and third levels; 2nd level schools implemented the curricular components of the first and second levels along with the most important components of the third level; while 3rd level schools implemented all three curricular components in their full scope. In the case of the latter, the basic curricular components of the first level were taught in the first four years of education, the components of the second level in the fifth and sixth years of education, while those of the third level in the seventh, or in the case of eight-year schools in the seventh and eighth years of education.⁶

Third-level common schools had seven grades (each consisting of a one-year course). The case was different for the 1st and 2nd level schools. First-level

⁶ Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 1932 r. o ustroju szkolnictwa, Dz. U. 1932 r. Nr 38, poz. 389.

common schools had four grades, with the first and second grades implemented as a one-year course, the third grade as a two-year course, and the fourth grade as a three-year course. 2nd level common schools, in turn, had six grades, with grades one to five implemented as one-year courses and grade six as a two-year course.⁷ The curriculum of the common school of each level included the following subjects: religion, Polish language, history, geography, natural sciences, arithmetic and geometry, drawing, practical workshops, singing and physical education. The possibility of introducing other compulsory or optional subjects was regulated by separate provisions. The teaching methods used included lectures by teachers, working with textbooks, teaching aids and other equipment, as well as self-study.⁸

Pursuant to the act, young people who completed their compulsory education and did not attend any further education institutions were subject to compulsory supplementary education until the age of 18 in order to develop their social and civic competences and to broaden their general education in the area of the occupation of their choice. Such supplementary education was to be provided by supplementary vocational or general schools or as part of general supplementary education courses. Exemption from this obligation could only be granted if no suitable school or course were available. Supplementary schools, non-school educational institutions and courses were also provided for young people over the age of 18 and adults who wanted to broaden their knowledge.⁹

The head of a public common school and the teaching staff were obliged to take care of students living on the outskirts of the town, commuting to school, living in boarding houses and dormitories. They were also responsible for providing students in the final grade with vocational counselling.¹⁰

2.3. Middle schools

Under the new education system, the purpose of the general secondary school was to prepare young people to achieve full cultural development and participate

⁷ F. Śliwiński, *Zasady nowego ustroju szkolnictwa polskiego*, pp. 11–12.

⁸ Statut publicznych szkół powszechnych siedmioletnich. Załącznik do rozporządzenia Ministra WRiOP z dnia 21 listopada 1933 r., Dz. Urz. MWRiOP 1933 r. Nr 14, poz. 194.

⁹ Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 1932 r.o ustroju szkolnictwa, Dz. U. 1932 r. Nr 38, poz. 389.

¹⁰ Statut publicznych szkół powszechnych siedmioletnich. Załącznik do rozporządzenia Ministra WRiOP z dnia 21 listopada 1933 r., Dz. Urz. MWRiOP 1933 r. Nr 14, poz. 194.

in social life, as well as continue their education at higher-level institutions. The general secondary school was a six-year school divided into a four-year lower secondary school and a two-year secondary school. In addition to schools combining those two levels, there were also separate lower secondary and secondary schools. The teaching programme of the former was based on the curriculum of the 2nd level common school and provided foundations for the curriculum of the latter.¹¹

Admission to the four-year lower secondary school was open to students aged between 12 and 16 years who completed an education programme corresponding to that of the 2nd level common school or six grades of the 3rd level common school. Admission to the preliminary examination for the first grade of the lower secondary school (which included subjects such as Polish language, geography, arithmetic and geometry) required the submission of a diploma of successful completion of one of the two educational stages. Otherwise, the candidates were required to take a full entrance examination in all subjects covered by the curriculum of the 2nd level common school, with the exception of drawing, physical education, practical workshops and singing. In turn, students who had graduated from a 1st-level public common school had to cover the material taught in the fifth and sixth grades of the 3rd-level common school or, alternatively, had to complete these grades before being admitted to a lower secondary school. The head of the institution was the principal, who was responsible for organisational, educational and didactic matters. The Board of Teachers was a permanent body consisting of the principal, teaching staff, school doctor and sometimes a psychologist. The number of teachers employed at a lower secondary school could not be less than the number of its departments.

In terms of the curriculum, the lower secondary school was a general education institution (before the reform, these types of schools were divided into those focusing on mathematics, natural sciences, humanities, and classics), which included Latin classes. In addition to general education, the curriculum also took into account practical aspects related to daily life. Lower secondary schools were divided into male, female or co-educational institutions. Their curriculum provided for a more detailed and extensive education of Polish culture compared with the programme of common schools, including its links to practical life and the economy, as well as a systematic introduction to pan-human culture.

¹¹ Statut publicznych szkół powszechnych siedmioletnich. Załącznik do rozporządzenia Ministra WRiOP z dnia 21 listopada 1933 r., Dz. Urz. MWRiOP 1933 r. Nr 14, poz. 194.

It comprises compulsory subjects (religion, Polish language, Latin, one of modern foreign languages, history, geography, natural sciences, physics, chemistry, practical workshops, physical education) and optional subjects (second modern foreign language, drawing, singing).

Students were promoted to subsequent grades based on their scores in the compulsory subjects achieved during the year. A satisfactory score was required for promotion, but in exceptional cases, the student could be promoted to the second or third grade despite failing in one subject. Scores in optional subjects were not taken into account. A fourth grader who had achieved at least satisfactory annual scores in all compulsory subjects and behaviour received a certificate of completion of the lower secondary school, which allowed him or her to apply for admission to a general secondary school or a secondary level vocational school.

Teaching at the lower secondary school was based on school work and the student's self-study, which was intended to consolidate the knowledge acquired at school, as well as to explore other topics. The purpose of the textbook was to present organised material to help students learn and consolidate knowledge. What was stressed was the interdependence of education received at home and at school in the process of upbringing. Parents were expected to be familiar with the functioning and goals of the education provided by the school, as well as to actively cooperate and exchange information with the school about the student's learning and living conditions. The principal and the teachers were obliged to take special care of the living conditions of students living in boarding houses and dormitories, those who commuted to school, as well as those who were in difficult material conditions.¹²

Under the Act on the Education System, secondary schools were divided—based on the curriculum—into departments with appropriately selected groups of subjects. The curriculum of this type of school was based on that of the lower secondary school and provided the students with theoretical and academic preparation for continuing their education at higher level institutions.¹³

¹² F. Śliwiński, *Zasady nowego ustroju szkolnictwa polskiego*, pp. 19–25.

¹³ Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 1932 r. o ustroju szkolnictwa, Dz. U. 1932 r. Nr 38, poz. 389.

2.4. Vocational schools

The purpose of vocational education was to prepare young people for their future professional life. It involved theoretical and practical vocational training with elements of general, social and civic education. This type of education was provided by vocational schools as well as vocational courses. Vocational schools were divided into supplementary, general and preparatory schools. The purpose of supplementary schools was to provide young people with the necessary theoretical knowledge and to expand on the practical training received at the place of employment. The 3-year study programme of this type of school was based on that of the first or second level common school. Considering the specific needs of a given occupation, the Minister of Religious Beliefs and Public Enlightenment could shorten or extend it by one year.

In turn, general vocational schools were intended to provide theoretical and practical vocational preparation. They were divided into several levels: lower level (they were mainly of a practical nature, with their programme based on that of the first level common school and, depending on the profession, implemented over 2 or 3 years; it was open to candidates who in a given calendar year had turned 13 or 14 years old); lower secondary level (in addition to practical aspects, they focused on theoretical vocational preparation and included aspects of general education; their programme was based on that of the second or third level common school and, depending on the profession, was implemented over 2 or 4 years; the lower age limit for admission of candidates was 13 years); secondary level (in addition to practical aspects, they focused on more detailed theoretical vocational preparation and included aspects of general education; the programme of these schools was based on the curriculum of the lower secondary school and, depending on the profession, was implemented over 2 or 3 years; the lower age limit for admission of candidates was 16 years). Graduates of the various levels of vocational schools were able to supplement their knowledge by participating in various courses. In addition to the types of vocational schools mentioned above, master and supervisor schools were also provided. These were intended for skilled craftsmen and industrial or technical workers and allowed students to expand their professional knowledge. In order to be admitted, the candidate had to pass an apprenticeship examination or receive preparation deemed sufficient by the Minister of Religious Beliefs and Public Enlightenment and have completed a 3-year apprenticeship programme. The last type, preparatory vocational schools, were intended for graduates of all education levels. These institutions

provided one-year courses, teaching the basic aspects necessary for a given profession.¹⁴

The organisation of vocational education under the new system differed from the previous one in that graduating from a lower secondary level vocational school gave the student the same rights as graduating from a general lower secondary school. In turn, graduation from a secondary-level vocational school enabled the graduate to apply for admission to higher education institutions, which had not been possible under the previous system. This was to contribute to the quality and popularity of these schools. Different types of vocational schools were to be provided under the Act on the Education System. For organisational reasons, several vocational schools could be combined into a single educational institution under the same name, with an indication of its individual components.¹⁵

2.5. Private schools

The situation of private schools was different compared with that of public schools. Private schools and courses, as well as other private academic and educational institutions, were subject to the supervision of the state school authorities. A private school could be established by any Polish citizen provided that: he/she submitted to the competent school authority the statutes of the school indicating its internal regulations, the language of instruction, the curriculum, the name and the relationship of the school owner to the school manager and teachers; he/she provided adequate premises, equipment and school aids; he/she demonstrated that he/she had sufficient funds for maintaining the school; he/she submitted an appropriate document from the state authorities confirming his/her impeccable conduct in terms of moral principles and the law. The superintendent of the relevant school district then decided on whether the conditions for establishing a school were met. A private school could be closed if it was found to have been closed without justification for three months, if its academic or educational level was considered insufficient, or if the regulations or provisions of the school's statutes were not observed. Another reason for closure could also be the implementation of education undermining the state. A private school could not function without a principal or deputy principal

¹⁴ Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 1932 r. o ustroju szkolnictwa, Dz. U. 1932 r. Nr 38, poz. 389.

¹⁵ F. Śliwiński, *Zasady nowego ustroju szkolnictwa polskiego*, pp. 30–35.

approved by the school authorities on the recommendation of the school owner. The principal and teaching staff had to possess the required professional qualifications. The school authorities could suspend the principal (or teacher) or demand his or her removal if they considered that he or she was exerting a harmful influence on students, was not complying with the regulations in force or was grossly neglecting his or her duties.¹⁶

2.6. Higher education institutions

Under the Act on the Education System, higher education institutions were divided into academic and non-academic institutions. Graduates of general secondary schools, secondary schools for kindergarten and primary school teachers, as well as secondary level vocational schools were allowed to apply for admission at higher education institutions as ordinary students, if they had a diploma qualifying them for continuing their studies at such institutions or had obtained such a diploma by passing a relevant examination. In addition, admission was open to anyone who did not meet these conditions but obtained a permit from the Minister of Religious Beliefs and Public Enlightenment, based on a duly justified application accepted by the Faculty Council. The Act provided for the organisation of a state defence, citizenship studies and physical fitness college for students of higher education institutions. It was to be established under the supervision of such institutions or separately under the terms indicated by the Minister of the Religious Beliefs and Public Enlightenment. The Act of 11 March on the Education System indicated that the organisation of education provided for therein would be implemented (with regard to common schools, general secondary schools, vocational schools, secondary schools for teachers and teachers' colleges), at the latest within six years of the entry into force of the Act.¹⁷ The system of higher education institutions was regulated by a separate Act on Academic Institutions.¹⁸

¹⁶ F. Śliwiński, *Zasady nowego ustroju szkolnictwa polskiego*, pp. 37–38.

¹⁷ Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 1932 r. o ustroju szkolnictwa, Dz. U. 1932 r. Nr 38, poz. 389.

¹⁸ Ustawa z dnia 15 maja 1933 r. o szkołach akademickich, Dz. U. 1933 r. Nr 29, poz. 247.

3. Assessment of the structure of the Polish education system

The Act on the Education System entered into force on 1 July 1932.¹⁹ Starting from the school year 1932/33, the lower grades of state lower secondary schools, as well as state teachers colleges, were gradually abolished. Nevertheless, the economic crisis and the baby boom, as well as shortages of teachers, hindered the implementation of the objectives of this law. In terms of the achievements of the education system in the interwar period, it could be said that education was nationalised, a single basic type of common school was established for the entire country, and the network of common schools, general and vocational secondary schools, as well as higher education institutions was expanded. The teacher training system was also improved and possibilities of pursuing further professional education and training were provided.²⁰

However, the new structure of the education system was criticised by the opposition. The right wing accused those in power of destroying the traditional secondary school, which was the basis of cultural heritage, while the left wing claimed that secondary schools had turned into elitist institutions due to the process of selection at lower levels of education. Some saw the changes made to the education system as too radical, while others considered them not radical enough. Some pointed out that the reform was unfavourable to peasants, while others claimed it was disadvantageous to the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia classes.²¹

Notably, the reform was noticed by European and American educational circles.²² It aroused the interest of the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation in Geneva, an organ of the League of Nations. Ministers of education from other countries visited Poland to learn more about the state of Polish education. Foreign periodicals, including the New York weekly "School and Society" and the German monthly "Deutsche Volkserziehung," published reviews on this topic. The opinions on the Polish reforms in the area of education were

¹⁹ Rozporządzenie Ministra WRiOP z dnia 30 maja 1932 r., Dz. U. RP 1932 r., nr 51, poz. 48.

²⁰ E. Magiera, *Wychowanie państwowe w szkolnictwie powszechnym Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, Szczecin 2003, pp. 41–42.

²¹ J. Sadowska, *Ku szkole na miarę Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, Białystok 2001, pp. 287–288.

²² L. Grochowski, *Studia z dziejów polskiej szkoły i polskiej pedagogiki lat międzywojennych*, Wydawnictwo Żak, Warszawa 1996.

clearly positive, highlighting the aspiration to unify the education system and modernise the methods of pedagogical work.²³

Jędrzejewicz's reforms remained in force only for a short period (seven years). Despite numerous critical voices, it must be acknowledged that the reform was based on well-thought-out, coherent and modern pedagogical and organisational concepts, adapted to the complex socio-political and economic conditions.

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²³ J. Sadowska, *Ku szkole na miarę Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, p. 287.