Aldona Domańska¹

**Education system in the Polish state in the first years
after regaining independence (1917–1921)**

Keywords: education, decree, Constitution, general obligation to learn, illiteracy, culture

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja, dekret, Konstytucja, powszechny obowiązek nauki, analfabetyzm, kultura,

Abstract

After regaining independence, different legal systems remaining after the partitioners were in force in the lands of the forming Polish state. Reconstruction of statehood began with a disastrous state of education. The issue of education and the fight against widespread illiteracy was a very important issue both for society and the emerging authorities during the partitions. After regaining independence, the first task of educational authorities was to unify the school system, i.e. to define its organization, tasks, ideological foundations and programs. This process began in 1914, and the implementation of a general obligation to learn began intensively from 1917. However, due to the multitude of problems of the reviving state, including primarily financial, but also due to the lack of staff, buildings or school equipment, they resulted in the fact that general obligation to educate was not fulfilled. This meant that despite the efforts of authorities, the fundamental problem of illiteracy in the Polish society in indicated period was not eliminated.

¹ ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9343-6932, PhD habil., The Department of Constitutional Law of Faculty of Law and Administration of University of Łódź. E-mail: adomanska@wpia.uni.lodz.pl.

Streszczenie**Systemu edukacji w państwie polskim w pierwszych latach po odzyskaniu niepodległości (1917–1921)**

Po odzyskaniu niepodległości na ziemiach tworzącego się państwa polskiego obowiązywały różne systemy prawne pozostałe po zaborcach. Odbudowę państwowości rozpoczęto z katastrofalnym stanem oświaty. Sprawa edukacji i walka z powszechnym analfabetyzmem była bardzo ważną kwestią zarówno dla społeczeństwa, jak i powstających władz jeszcze w czasie zaborów. Po odzyskaniu niepodległości pierwszym zadaniem władz oświatowych stało się ujednolicenie systemu szkolnego, tj. określenie jego organizacji, zadań, podstaw ideowych i programów. Proces ten rozpoczął się jeszcze w 1914, intensywnie zaś rozpoczęto wdrażanie powszechnego obowiązku nauki od 1917 r. Jednak ze względu na wielość problemów odradzającego się państwa w tym przede wszystkim finansowych, ale także spowodowanych brakiem kadry, budynków czy wyposażenia szkolnego skutkowały one w praktyce tym, że powszechny obowiązek edukacji nie był realizowany. Oznaczało to, że mimo starań władz zasadniczy problem jakim był analfabetyzm społeczeństwa polskiego we wskazanym okresie nie został wyeliminowany.

After regaining independence, the lands of new Polish state were governed by various legal systems remaining after the partitioners. This meant that the authorities were faced with challenge of creating a single legal system.

Reconstruction of statehood began with a disastrous state of education. Education was a very important issue both for the society and emerging authorities during the partitions. At that time, compulsory education existed only in the part subordinate to the Austrian and Prussian state, where the language of instruction was German. Definitely, the worst situation was in lands of the former Russian partition. The policy of Germanization and Russification leading to the degeneration of the Polish society, pursued by partitioners, also caused a great devastation in culture and education².

² W. Garbowska, *Szkolnictwo powszechne w Polsce w latach 1932–1939*, Wrocław 1976; S. Michalski, *Koncepcje systemu edukacji w II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw 1988; B. Jacewski, *Polityka naukowa państwa polskiego w latach 1918–1939*, Wrocław 1978.

After regaining independence, the first task of educational authorities was to unify the school system, i.e. to define its organization, tasks, ideological foundations and programs. Already in 1914, the first bodies were established to coordinate activities in the field of education. These included the Pedagogical Commission and the Central School Office. Appointed by the Germans, after the occupation of Warsaw, the Regency Council and then the Council of State of the Kingdom of Poland contributed to establishment on January 23, 1917 in Warsaw of the Department of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment as the executive body of the Transitional Commission of the Provisional Council of State of the Kingdom of Poland. In accordance with the regulations of the Council of State adopted on January 30, 1917, they became departments headed by the Head. In fact, this department began to exercise power on October 1, 1917, when the German occupation authorities transferred to him the management of elementary and secondary education³. Then, in December 1918, it was transformed into the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment⁴, and the first minister of education in independent Poland became Ksawery Prauss⁵.

The announcement of universal education was also included in the manifesto created in Lublin on the night of November 6–7, 1918 of the Provisional People's Government of the Republic of Poland, headed by Ignacy Daszyński. Article 9 (f) of the aforementioned act calls for the introduction of universal, compulsory and free of charge secular school education⁶. Article 5 as-

³ R. Szawlowski, *Najwyższe państwowe organy kontroli II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw 2004, pp. 41–49.

⁴ Art. 26 decree of the Regency Council on the temporary organization of the Supreme Authorities in the Kingdom of Poland of 3 January 1918. (Dz.P.K.P. No. 1, item 1).

⁵ M. Wierchnicki, *Reformy oświaty w XX-wiecznej Polsce*, 14 września 2015, p. 1 [http://historykon.pl/reformy-oswiaty-w-xx-wiecznej-polsce/\(03.01.2018\)](http://historykon.pl/reformy-oswiaty-w-xx-wiecznej-polsce/(03.01.2018)); E. Wolter, *Działalność Ministerstwa Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej w zakresie ochrony przyrody*, "Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae UKSW" 2012, vol. 10, No. 2, p. 10.

⁶ For more information: A. Ajnenkiel, *Od rządów ludowych do przewrotu majowego. Zarys dziejów politycznych Polski 1918–1926*, Warsaw 1978; A. Ajnenkiel, *Z dziejów Tymczasowego Rządu Ludowego w Lublinie*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 1958, No. 4; I. Daszyński, *Pamiętniki*, t. II, Warsaw 1957; A. Próchnik, *Pierwsze piętnastolecie Polski niepodległej. Zarys dziejów politycznych*, Warsaw 1983.

sumed the introduction of the principle of equality⁷, also in the area of access to education.

After November 11, 1918, the first and basic task of educational authorities was to unify the school system. For this purpose, in 1919 the Minister of Education – Ksawery Prauss, prepared a program declaration in which he formulated general principles of the school system⁸. The basis of future school system was to be the 7th class primary school for children of all social classes. The reform of general secondary education was to consist in separating the lower classes and combining them with common schools, as well as creation of higher classes, 5-year junior high schools of several types. Particular emphasis was placed in the project on consistent implementation of the principle of education unity. Program continuity was to be maintained between primary schools, even the lowest organized ones, and secondary and higher education institutions. Religion was taught without religious compulsion, and the parent had the right to exempt his child from this subject.

On the initiative of the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment, in April 1919 a National Teachers' Meeting⁹ was organized in Warsaw on April 14–17, 1919 in order to discuss more important problems of education in Reborn Poland, including the demands of Minister K. Prauss. The congress was called the Teachers' Sejm, because the delegates discussed drafts that were to be submitted to the Legislative Sejm¹⁰.

General obligation of seven-year education for children was introduced by a decree of February 7, 1919, issued by the Head of State – Józef Piłsudski¹¹. Under Art. 1 of this Act, education in a general school was compulsory for all children between the ages of 7 and 14. Compulsory schooling could be carried out in public primary schools and other schools of all types, provided that the scope of information provided in them was not lower than in public schools, as well as at home, provided that the binding teaching content correspond-

⁷ Manifesto of the Provisional People's Government of the Polish Republic, November 6–7, 1918, the Provisional People's Government of the Republic of Poland in Lublin, the Museum of the City of Łódź.

⁸ R. Wroczyński, *Dzieje oświaty polskiej 1795–1945*, Warsaw 1980.

⁹ M. Wierchnicki, *Reformy oświaty w XX-wiecznej Polsce*, 14 września 2015, p. 1, <http://historykon.pl/reformy-oswiaty-w-xx-wiecznej-polsce> (3.01.2018).

¹⁰ Ks.A. Orczyk, *Zarys historii szkolnictwa i myśli pedagogicznej*, Warsaw 2008, p. 293.

¹¹ Decree of 7 February 1919 on compulsory education (Dz.P. No. 14, item 147).

ed to the curriculum of primary schools. In cases of fulfilling the obligation in a different way than in common schools, the pupil was obliged to pass an examination to check the level of his knowledge, conducted by the school inspector. It follows from the provisions of the Decree that then authorities established an educational obligation, but not an obligation to attend a public primary school. In practice, implementation of this obligation differed in individual extra-aboard areas¹². Various problems of the reborn state, mainly financial, but also caused by the lack of teachers, buildings or school equipment, resulted in the fact that decree was not fully implemented in practice. This meant that despite the efforts of authorities, the fundamental problem of illiteracy in the Polish society was not eliminated¹³.

The authorities of Reborn Polish state were aware of the fact that a necessary condition for creation of a unified education system is to have qualified staff¹⁴. Aware of this, the Regency Council of the Kingdom of Poland, with the consent of the Council of State, before the Decree came into force, issued the Temporary Act on the salaries of teachers of public elementary schools¹⁵. Three months later, the Head of State, Józef Piłsudski, signed a temporary decree on the stabilization and remuneration of common teachers¹⁶. In 1920, the following four acts comprehensively regulated the remuneration of teaching staff, from primary school teachers to academic teachers¹⁷.

¹² Cf. inter alia M. Falski, *Kwestie podstawowe w organizacji szkolnictwa powszechnego*, Warsaw 1936, pp. 12–13; W. Garbowska, *Szkolnictwo powszechne w Polsce w latach 1932–1939*, Wrocław 1976; S. Michalski, *Koncepcje systemu edukacji w II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw 1988; B. Jaczewski, *Polityka naukowa państwa polskiego w latach 1918–1939*, Wrocław 1978.

¹³ *Wdrażanie powszechności nauczania w II Rzeczypospolitej w pierwszych latach istnienia szkół powszechnych*, https://www.kul.pl/files/803/biblioteczka_cyfrowa/jusko_wdrazanie_powszechnosci.pdf, p. 8 (22.01.2018) “Miesięcznik Statystyczny GUS RP” 1920, p. 23.

¹⁴ *W sprawie Seminarjum dla nauczycieli w Częstochowie*, “Goniec Częstochowski” 1917, No. 158, pp. 2–3.

¹⁵ The Provisional Law of September 19, 1918 on the pay of teachers of public elementary schools (Dz.P. No. 17, item 45).

¹⁶ Interim Decree of December 28, 1918 on stabilization and remuneration of universal teachers (Dz.P. No. 21, item 65).

¹⁷ Act of 13 July 1920 on the salary of teachers, directors, inspectors of state vocational schools and seminars for vocational school teachers (Dz.U. No. 65, item 435); Act of 13 July 1920 on the salary of teachers, directors, inspectors of state vocational schools and seminars for vocational school teachers; Act of 13 July 1920 on the salary of teachers of public public

An important element of creating the education system in the Polish state in the first years after regaining independence was an attempt to unify the system of higher education. For this purpose, a law on academic schools was issued in July 1920¹⁸. According to its provisions, the task of higher education institutions was to serve science and homeland, to seek and investigate the truth in all branches of knowledge, as well as to prepare young people for practical professions, the performance of which requires scientific mastery of various branches of knowledge and an independent court on theoretical and practical issues falling within their scope. The purpose of enacted Act was to unify the system of higher education. However, it left considerable autonomy to universities. Both public and private schools were divided into vocational and academic schools, i.e. those which had the right to award academic, vocational and scientific degrees. The procedures for conferring the academic degree of PhD, the habilitation procedure and the precise rules for appointing professors were regulated in detail. It stated that a person holding the “academic title” of PhD in the event of being convicted of a criminal offence by a court shall be deprived of it by the senate of the university which granted the title. Universities were to be apolitical¹⁹. The reconstruction of scientific life was based primarily on the former staff. Over 30% of professors of then universities were educated by Galician universities, mainly by the Jagiellonian University²⁰.

In the interwar period, many institutions for international intellectual cooperation were also established. Leading were the International Academic Union (L'Union académique internationale – UAI) and the International Research Council (Conseil International de Recherches). The entity authorized to represent Polish science in these institutions was the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences. In addition, cooperation was undertaken with the Inter-

schools, school inspectors and school inspectorates (Dz.U. No. 65, item 434); Act of 13 July 1920 on the salary of teachers and directors of state general secondary schools, teaching seminars and preparand, and school inspectors (Dz.U. No. 65, item 433); Act of 13 July 1920 on the support of professors, other lecturers and academic helpers in state-owned academic schools (Dz.U. No. 65, item 432).

¹⁸ Act of 13 July 1920 on academic schools (Dz.U. No. 72, item 494).

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ B. Jaczewski, *Życie naukowe w Polsce Odrodzonej w: Życie naukowe w Polsce w drugiej połowie XIX i w XX wieku*, Wrocław i in. 1987.

national Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (Commission Internationale de la Coopération Intellectuelle) established at the League of Nations in Geneva (1922), of which Maria Skłodowska-Curie became its Vice-President, and Professor Oskar Halecki²¹ was its Secretary. The following years brought development in this field.

For a period indicated in the title is also the development of education for adults and institutions educating professional teaching staff in this field. Specialized departments of education functioned separately, such as artistic education, military education²², special education²³. At that time, the teachers' movement was developing dynamically – there were numerous unions and associations (Polish Teachers' Union (1905), Society of Teachers of Secondary Schools)²⁴.

Despite numerous undertaken actions to comprehensively regulate education issues in the first years after regaining independence, it was only with the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 17 March 1921 (Art. 117–120), supplemented by the amendment of 2 August 1926, laid down basic guidelines for school legislation. These provisions stated that: all schools and educational establishments, both public and private, are subject to supervision by the state authorities; in the case of general schools, education is compulsory for all citizens; education in general state and self-government schools is free of charge; religious education in state and self-government schools is compulsory for young people under 18 years of age; scientific research and the announcement of its results are free²⁵. The provisions of the Basic Law were to be implemented by the provisions of the rank of Act²⁶.

²¹ B. Suchodolski, *Wstęp*, [In:] *Historia nauki polskiej*, Wrocław 1970, p. 7.

²² *Polskie szkolnictwo wojskowe 1908–1939 – Odznaki, emblematy, dokumenty*, eds. W.B. Moś, W. Soszyński, Cracow 2007.

²³ M. Grzegorzewska, the author of program concept and 1922 organizer of the State Institute of Special Pedagogy, educating teachers of special schools, placed great merits in this field.

²⁴ Established on 28–30 December 1919 from the merger of the Society of Teachers of Universities of Galicia and the Association of Polish Teachers of the Kingdom of Poland. Szerzej J. Durka, *Wybrane problemy z działalności wydawniczej Towarzystwa Nauczycieli Szkół Średnich i Wyższych w dwudziestolecu międzywojennym*, [In:] *Działalność instytucji wydawniczych na rzecz oświaty i edukacji w XX i pierwszych latach XXI wieku*, eds. I. Michalska, G. Michalski, Łódź 2014, pp. 45–57.

²⁵ Dz.U.RP 1921, No. 44, item 267; Dz.U. RP 1926, No. 78, item 442.

²⁶ F. Śliwiński, *Organizacja władz szkolnych i szkolnictwa wszystkich stopni w Polsce Odrodzonej*, wyd. 2, Warsaw 1929, p. 10.

The above considerations prove that Polish education, or in fact its lack at the moment of regaining independence, was a serious challenge for the Re-born Polish state. However, it should also be noted that development of education caused changes in other areas, including above all in culture. The enthusiasm of a new emerging society was also visible in the creative spheres. New trends in art and literature, and even fashion, have emerged. During this period cinema, theatre and cabaret developed, which had both a propaganda and educational impact. It should be emphasized that changes in the education of the Polish society were systematically changing during the interwar period²⁷.

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²⁷ More information on the society of the Second Republic of Poland in works: W. Mędrzecki, J. Żarnowski, *Metamorfozy społeczne, tom 10, Społeczeństwo międzywojenne: nowe spojrzenie*, Warsaw 2015; J. Żarnowski, *Społeczeństwo Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej 1918–1939*, Warsaw 1973, Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Druga Rzeczpospolita, Gospodarka. Społeczeństwo. Miejsce w świecie*, Warsaw 1977; Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Polska w Europie i świecie 1918–1939*, Warsaw 1984; P. Stańczak, *Wykształcenie ludności II Rzeczypospolitej w świetle badań GUS, “Społeczeństwo i Ekonomia”* 2016, No. 1 (5), pp. 12–22.

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