Colloquium 2(58)/2025
ISSN 2081-3813, e-ISSN 2658-0365
CC BY-NC-ND.4.0
DOI: http://doi.org/10.34813/18coll2025

THE LEGAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD (1918–1939)

Prawne i organizacyjne podstawy oświaty dorosłych w okresie międzywojennym (1918–1939)

Eleonora Sapia-Drewniak

e-mail: esapia@op.pl
ORCID 0000-0003-3779-8004

Abstract

After the Polish state had regained independence in 1918, one of the most important tasks posed to the authorities was to eliminate illiteracy, and to raise the general level of education of the adult population. Realization of those goals was hampered though, because of the differing standpoints on this issue, which were represented by the state educational authorities, local governments and educational organizations. As a result, throughout the Interwar period, there was only one act passed in connection with obligatory literacy courses for recruits in the Polish Army. Although there were a few draft bills submitted to the Parliament, which dealt with legal regulations of the outside-school education, in view of the lack of acceptance by all of the organizers, they were not passed finally. Despite that, systematic education was developed in the form of courses for the illiterate, schools for adults and public libraries. This contributed to the cultural activity of citizens, and a decrease in the number of illiterate population in the country.

Keywords: outside-school education, educational system designed for the adult, drafts of bills related to education of adults.

Streszczenie

Po odzyskaniu niepodległości przez państwo polskie w 1918 r. ważnym zadaniem była likwidacja analfabetyzmu i podniesienie ogólnego poziomu wykształcenia dorosłej ludności. Realizacja tych zamierzeń była utrudniona poprzez odmienne stanowisko w tej kwestii państwowych władz oświatowych, samorządowych oraz organizacji oświatowych. W całym okresie międzywojennym wydano tylko jedną ustawę dotyczącą alfabetyzacji poborowych w wojsku. Chociaż wniesiono do Sejmu kilka projektów dotyczących prawnych uregulowań oświaty pozaszkolnej, wobec braku akceptacji przez wszystkich organizatorów nie zostały one uchwalone. Mimo tego rozwijano systematyczne kształcenie w formie kursów dla analfabetów, szkół dla dorosłych oraz bibliotek publicznych. Przyczyniło się to do aktywności kulturalnej, a także do zmniejszenia analfabetyzmu wśród dorosłych.

Słowa kluczowe: oświata pozaszkolna, system oświaty dorosłych, projekty ustaw dotyczących kształcenia dorosłych.

Following the regaining of independence by the Polish state in 1918, one of the vital problems faced by the educational authorities was liquidation of widespread illiteracy among adult population and raising the levels of comprehensive and vocational education of the citizens. An important role in this respect fell to the education of adults, which was expected to contribute to achieving the above-mentioned goals. The authorities realised that it was thanks to a successful implementation of those assumptions that economic development of the state would be possible. Therefore, it seems relevant to undertake to conduct an analysis addressing the following questions:

1. What legal rules were applied to regulate the questions pertaining to education of adults?
2. What were the lines of cooperation between entities responsible for organizing education outside schools?
3. What legislative bills relating to education of adults were prepared in the Interwar period?

In order to obtain answers to these questions, I mainly used the information from the primary source which was andragogic print media of the Interwar period, and a few studies dealing with the history of education of adults.

In the period under analysis, the activity in the scope of forming the organizational foundations of the educational system designed for the adult was carried out by both the Polish state, local governments, and socio-educational organizations. The Polish state had the greatest possibilities of supporting and controlling it through financing and establishing legal bases in the form of bills and ordinances. Those actions will thus be discussed in the first place, since it is necessary to establish to what extent the state managed to meet the demands and fulfil its duties in connection with education of adults.

The year 1918 saw the establishment of the Department of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment as part of the Ministry of Denominations and Public Enlightenment (henceforth: MDPE). In turn, within the framework of the former, there was the Executive Office for Outside-School Education established, which was transformed into the Department of Outside-School Education (henceforth: DOSE) a few months later. In the years 1918-1923, its goals were to coordinate, deepen and expand educational work run to date on the territories of all the former Partitions by socio-educational organizations. Those tasks included the following: organization and financing courses for adults, establishing first public libraries, coordination of educational actions by local governments and societies, subsidizing educational organizations dealing with education of the adult, care of the level of the educational work, organization of quarterly conferences, and editing the magazine *Oświata Pozaszkolna* [The Outside-School Education].

The educational situation in the newly-established state was most unfavourable.

> One whole generation of those moving from their childhoods and boyhoods towards their adulthood during the time of war present themselves as neglected and unknowing, an

> ignorant generation, who – because of the historical turmoil – have been deprived of the benefit of being educated (Wydział Oświaty Pozaszkolnej..., 1921, p. 2).

This statement was supported by the numbers of people who did not hold the skills of either reading or writing. In comparison with other European states, where the percentage of the illiterate amounted to, for example, 10% in England, 2% in Denmark, 0.004% in Germany, in Poland it was as high as half (50%!) of the population of the country (Wydział Oświaty Pozaszkolnej..., 1921, p. 2). There was thus a great need to take quick action aimed at changing that situation.

The first Minister of Education in the independent Polish state, Ksawery Prauss, endeavoured to establish the fundamental principles behind the organization of the school system, and to define and delineate the main directions of its development. It was primarily on his initiative that the Teachers' Convention was held between 14 and 17 April 1919 – at that time the most important event connected with education. Beside the issues which were raised in connection with the school system designed for children and youth, a considerable amount of attention was devoted to problems of outside-school education meant to compensate the shortcomings in the scope of education of adult citizens.

During the sessions the views clashed which related to referring the organization and control over the education system designed for the adult to the Department of Outside-School Education (an agenda of the Ministry), or leaving it as a social activity in the hands of various educational-social organizations. The majority of delegates supported the concept of outside-school education based on the initiative and self-help of society. It was feared that the interference on the part of the state in this sphere of activity would be too intrusive as it had already been organized by educational societies functioning on the territories of the three Partitions, since the turn of the 19th and the 20th century. The organ responsible for supervision and control of actions run in this respect all over the country was to be the Department of Outside-School Education of the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment (henceforth: DOSE of MRDPE). The state was also to materially support outside-school education in the regions where organizing it would not be possible to realize by means of local society's initiatives (Kopczewski, 1920, p. 64).

In July 1919, the only bill directly connected with education of the adult was passed in the Republic of Poland – *On the forced teaching of the illiterate and half-literate in the Army* (Dz. U. 1919, no. 63, pos. 373). In the first Article of the Act it was stated that soldiers deprived of the possibility of getting elementary education at their school age and "not skilled enough at reading and writing in Polish are subject to obligatory teaching in the period of their serving in the Army" (Dz. U. 1919, no. 63, pos. 373). The records were consistently put into practice with reference to recruits all over the country. As a result of the educational activity implemented in this environment a significant decrease in the percentage of the illiterate in the Army towards

the end of the Interwar period – to as little as 5%, was observed. The popularization of elementary education nationwide also had a substantial share in the drop in the number of illiterate soldiers.

In 1921, the DOSE of MRDPE, in cooperation with educational activists, worked out a draft of the bill called *On the obligation of establishing and maintaining the elementary courses for the adult and public libraries* which was to secure solid organizational-financial bases for realization of the then most urgent educational tasks, that is providing literacy courses. That job was to be directly done by cities', communes' and counties' self-governments (Sutyła, 1982, p. 38). In the draft, it was pointed to the fact that

> Communal unions and cities isolated from these unions are obliged to organize courses for the adult if at least 30 people have called at the given centre, who are over 16 years old and demand that a course should be organized for them. (Sutyła, 1982, p. 38)

The bill was submitted to the Sejm in May 1921 and was the subject of discussions at the Educational Commission of the Sejm. Nevertheless, it did not meet with the acceptance on the part of its members.

Another draft of the *Act on outside-school education* was prepared and subsequently published in *The Outside-School Education* magazine in 1923, with the intention of launching discussions on its content. It was indicated in it that "Work in the domain of outside-school education aims to facilitate access to knowledge and culture to the widest possible groups of adult people and youth, outside the framework of the regular school system […]" (Korniłowicz, 1923, p. 304). In Article II, on the other hand, it was written that "The right to run all kinds of work pertaining to outside-school education is granted to each citizen and each legal entity" (Korniłowicz, 1923, p. 304). The state was responsible for "Granting to communal unions subsidies for realization of educational goals, primarily maintenance of courses and libraries, as well as long-term loans for expenses connected with investments in this respect, first of all building educational houses" (Korniłowicz, 1923, p. 304). Local governments were expected to maintain and systematically run courses for the young and adult illiterate and half-literate. This form of educational work at that time was of the top priority. The draft did not point explicitly who the organizer should be. It was only said in it that "The educational work can be organized by a communal union and the state on their own, or by means of social institutions on the basis of agreements reached with them" (Korniłowicz, 1923, p. 304). It was proposed to extend the obligatory education over the illiterate and the half-literate. Employers were obligated to provide them with lower workload without lowering their pay. The draft was not accepted by the Parliament and consequently it was not implemented in the Interwar period, because educational societies which enjoyed the support of the then government opposed it effectively.

In the early period of the functioning of the Polish state, there was no bill passed which would obligate local governments to finance, for instance, courses and libraries. Yet, some communes did assign certain quota to educate the illiterate and to found libraries. Also, some municipal offices organized educational centres. During the Educational Convention of Polish Cities held in April 1922 and the Convention of County Parliaments, which took place on 2-3 December 1923, the participants agreed that commissions in charge of outside-school education and culture should be established at municipalities. The work of outside-school institutions was to be subsidized by local parliaments, whose additional responsibility was also to employ a special educational official (Sutyła, 1982, p. 49).

An attempt at working out a legal regulation of questions connected with the responsibility for the condition of the outside-school education system was made at the conference held in Bydgoszcz on May 30, 1923 – a meeting of delegates of educational institutions, representatives of municipal authorities and county local governments. The standpoints on the legal regulation of the state's and local governments' duties with reference to outside-school education differed considerably. The delegates of pre-war educational societies negated the justifiability of passing a bill on outside-school education system, whereas the representatives of the educational left wing and certain local governments advocated transferring the system to local governments' bodies. The Chief of the DOSE of MRDPE, Aleksander Janowski, argued that "In the interest of educating the nation and citizens, there must exist a co-operation of the state, local governments and social organizations" (Wydział Oświaty Pozaszkolnej..., Konferencja…, 1923, p. 337). In the papers delivered at the meetings, it was indicated that local governments are entities which stand the closest to every citizen, and thus can act for the benefit of all social groups, as far as organizing educational activity is concerned in communes, counties or provinces. For this to bring concrete results, it ought to be carried out on a systematic basis, be planned and have financial means guaranteed. This will be possible only in the situation where there is an act passed on the outside-school education system. However, part of the participants did not see the need for passing such a bill (Wydział Oświaty Pozaszkolnej..., Konferencja…, 1923, p. 337).

In those days, the financial situation of the state was rather difficult. The parliamentary act on reparation of the treasure of the Republic of Poland of January 11, 1924 stipulated, among others, application of drastic budget cuts and transferring to local governments a number of actions conducted by organs of the state so far (with the exception of matters concerning schools and the educational system) (Grabski 2002, p. 24-25). The budget of the MRDPE was seriously limited, and the means at the disposal of the DOSE were almost liquidated completely. In consequence, organs of the government were inactive as regards launching educational actions for the adult.

It needs to be underlined here that actions in the sphere of organizing outside-school education, which appeared in the first years of the independent state, were run by educational activists and teachers of youth and the adult. They concentrated their educational tasks primarily around the following issues: fighting illiteracy, development of readership, national and civic education, as well as raising the cultural level of Polish society. The outside-school education of the day was meant to realize integrational, compensatory and creative tasks which supported the development of adult people. The work of the educators – despite the lack of a consentaneous approach among the organizers of it, that is educational societies, local governments and central government organs – was practically carried out by dedicated teachers both in cities, towns and in country villages.

In the years 1924-1928, the DOSE, in consequence of financial difficulties, did not engage in organizing work with the adult. That caused societies and socio-educational organizations to get more active in this domain. In December 1924, the educational societies of the pre-war time, united within the Union of Polish Educational Societies, organized a congress whose goal was to discuss methods of educational work (Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa..., Z ruchu…, 1928, p. 57). The main aims were delineated then, that is: liquidation of illiteracy, awakening and instilling educational-civic awareness and developing self-education in order to prevent functional illiteracy (Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa..., Z ruchu…, 1928, p. 57).

The bill on liquidation of illiteracy in the Republic of Poland was submitted by Walery Kuropatwiński to the MRDPE in 1927. The man's ten-year experience as a controller of Warsaw-based elementary schools convinced him in the belief that it was necessary to organize obligatory primary education for the adult, which would extend over persons aged between 14 and 40 years. Persons who would evade the duty were to be punished financially by law. This draft – in a similar way as that of the library bill prepared by the Union of Polish Librarians – was not implemented into the educational practice. It was opposed by both local government officials and representatives of pre-war social and educational organizations (Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa…, Mamorjał…, 1928, p. 48-51).

In the succeeding period, that is between 1928 and 1932, the role of the state authorities and local governments began to grow stronger regarding initiation and financing educational works. After the period of 10 years of holding the post of the Head of the DOSE of MRDPE, Aleksander Janowski left. His place was filled by Marian Bronisław Godecki. Departments of outside-school education began to be formed in the areas of school districts, and instructors were employed to do the job. The aim of the activity was to form a state-creative attitude (Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa..., I Ogólnokrajowa konferencja…, 1928, p. 319). In November 1929, the First All-Polish Conference of Outside-School Education was held, organized by the MRDPE. At the Conference, the important role of this educational activity was

emphasized. The financial situation changed as well, since increasingly high sums were allotted from the state budget to the education of adult citizens until the end of the 1920s. (Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa..., Kursy dla Doroslych…, 1929, p. 45-47). However, it still was not decided to cover this sphere of educational activity with any regulations that would be binding on the whole territory of the country.

The issues connected with the education of the adult found their reflection in the so-called Jędrzejewicz's Bill passed on March 11, 1932, contained in the Chapter *Continuing Education*. It stated that adults would be able to deepen and broaden their education by attending courses, in schools providing training, as well as with the help of other institutions dealing in the outside-school education system, according to the principles that were to be established in the directive issued by the Minister of the MRDPE. The bill provided

> apart from the seven-year school duty for every child: (1) Obligatory education until the age of 18 years; (2) Schools, educational training courses and institutions of outside-school education for youth over 18 years old and adults, enabling them to deepen and broaden their education; (3) Extending care and support over those who are self-taught and acquire education outside school. (Jamrożek, 2015, p. 164)

That was, however, merely a confirmation of the real state of things and did not introduce anything new – did not define the formal-systemic framework for the outside-school education system; neither did it settle the question of its financing.

In the directive of the President of the Republic of Poland, issued on July 4, 1933, concerning organization of district school authorities, the responsibility for running outside-school education was to rest on district school inspectors. The aim was to maintain a uniform line in the educational school and outside-school policies (Janiczek, 1934, p. 99). These tasks were precisely defined in the directive of the Minister of the MRDPE of August 25, 1933, when instructors of outside-school education were appointed. They were responsible for the following:

- researching and getting to know the needs of the outside-school education system, monitoring their fulfilment and organization of specialist aid,
- initiation and coordination of social actions in the field of outside-school education and putting them on the right paths,
- maintaining regular contacts with organs of local government and economic entities, as well as with relevant social institutions (Janiczek, 1934, p. 99).

In practice, they were required to cooperate with the local government authorities by participation in county commissions of outside-school education, where the height of the budget allotted to working with the illiterate, organization of libraries and provision of expert instruction were decided. They were also expected to examine the educational needs and to see to their satisfying (Janiczek, 1934, p. 99). Realization of the postulates was hampered, though, by the economic crisis, which resulted in continual limiting of the financial means available for this purpose.

Some improvement in the situation which was observed in the years 1935-1939, impacted on raising the financial means designed for this type of educational activity. This resulted in the fact that in the 1930s, local governments organized planned education of the adult population. At that time the conception of entrusting the organization of the outside-school education to local governments became more and more popular, partly in order to limit the share of the state authorities in the preparation of it. One of the advocates of that concept was Antoni Konewka, the then Head of the DOSE of MRDPE. Also, educational organizations were to run outside-school education, complement initiatives of local governments, but primarily were supposed to concentrate on developing various forms of educational work suitable to meet the needs of given communities.

As far as the educational work with the adult was concerned, it was vital to make efforts to develop readership and institutions related to it, that is common libraries. As early as in 1927 preparations of a library bill commenced, the act being expected to introduce the obligatory maintenance of public libraries by local governments. However, this conception was not implemented in consequence of protests from both educational organizations and local governments. It was not until June 1937 that the Ministry of Interior issued a circular concerning support for the library action. It was recommended to local governments to annually allot given sums for libraries. That was the first official document to deal with the public educational libraries, which was issued by the Polish Government (Dz. U. 1933 no. 50 pos. 389). Half a year later, in December 1937, the MRDPE issued an ordinance that subordinated and unified the functioning of evening schools for the adult and their curricula. On the power of it, the centres run and maintained by local governments and social-educational societies obtained the rights of public schools if they realized the curriculum recommended by the Ministry (Instytut Oświaty Dorosłych, 1938). From February 10, 1939 on, also in folk universities, the didactic-rearing programmes were standardized and the institutions were subordinated to school authorities.

In the twenty-year Interwar period, different issues connected with outside-school education were taken up at successive teachers' conventions and congresses. There were held four pedagogical congresses altogether: The First Pedagogical Congress in Poznań in 1929, the next one in Vilnius in 1931, two years later (1933) the one in Lvov, and the last one took place in Warsaw in 1939. Although addressing issues related to outside-school education was most significant to make necessary changes in the transformation of Polish society, at those all-Polish meetings of teachers they were not devoted too much attention. For instance, at the Poznań Congress only some attention was drawn to the functioning of outside-school organizations, libraries or theatres. Similarly, two years later, in Vilnius, Helena Radlińska was merely able to present questions pertaining to readership.

During the Fourth Pedagogical Congress organized by the Polish Teachers' Union in May 1939, resolutions were adopted also with reference to outside-school education. Establishing of a public and common-access educational system for adults was postulated in the form of open universities, public educational libraries, professional theatres, educational cinemas, educational houses and day-care centres, as well as museums. It was indicated that it was necessary to pass a bill which would oblige the state and the local government to organize education for adult citizens. Still, despite the fact that the questions pertaining to education of adults were devoted quite a large amount of time during the sessions of the Congress, the possibility of implementing the new postulates into practice never materialized because of the outbreak of the Second World War.

The organizational-financial issues relating to all forms of educational work were partially regulated by the *Act on unifying school government with territorial government* of 23 February 1939. It obligated local governments to finance and organize educational work. In compliance with it, organization, financing and running educational work were the responsibility of the local government authorities in cooperation with school government. The state, exclusively in exceptional situations, was to run the educational activity wherever local governments were not able to meet the inhabitants' needs (Dz. U. 1939, no. 16, pos. 92 and 93, art. 2).

To sum up, it can be stated that the scanty material means, the lack of acts on education, insufficient number of workers prepared and employed to work with the adult, were the most serious obstacles, as far as the outside-school education was concerned in the twenty-year Interwar period. One should not forget positive effects of that work. Of particular significance was the development of systematic education in the form of courses for the illiterate and schools designed for adolescents and adults. Even though there was no binding act which would oblige local governments to finance, for example, courses for the adult or public libraries, certain commune authorities did secure substantial sums in their budgets, which were allotted to educate the illiterate and setting up public libraries.

The twenty-year experience in the field of organizing outside-school education in the Second Republic of Poland, juxtaposed against the lack of legal solutions to the problem of illiteracy, caused the organization of such forms designed for the adult population as courses and schools for the adult, to be entirely dependent on the understanding of the problem chiefly by local government officials on the county, commune and municipal level, respectively. It is because of them that decisions to co-subsidize social institutions and organizations could be taken which, in turn, used the means to organize educational centres.

Debates on the outside-school education system, financing, organizing and placing it within the general educational system as such, discussions on its legal foundations, were carried out from the very beginnings of the Second Republic, between

subjects which organized it, that is state educational authorities, local governments and educational societies. Nevertheless, during the whole Interwar period, there was no accordance with reference to both its legal and organizational foundations. A common standpoint failed to be established in this sphere. Despite many difficulties, forms and methods of work with this category of learners were worked out, publication of andragogical magazines was launched and different educational centres were established. Therefore, considering all those accomplishments from the time perspective, it needs evaluating the then activities relating to outside-school education – despite many of its shortcomings and imperfections – have been positive.

REFERENCES

Dziennik Ustaw 1919 r. nr 63, poz. 373.
Dziennik Ustaw 1933 r. nr 50, poz. 389
Dziennik Ustaw 1939 r. nr 16, poz. 92
Dziennik Ustaw 1939 r. nr 16, poz. 93.
Grabski W. (2002), *Dwa lata pracy u podstaw państwowości naszej 1924–1925*. Ciekawe Miejsca.
Instytut Oświaty Dorosłych. (1938). Zarządzenie Ministra WRiOP z 13 grudnia 1937 r. nr II OP-10683/37. *Praca Oświatowa*, *2*, 101.
Jamrożek W. (2015), *Kongresy i zjazdy pedagogiczne w rozwoju polskiej myśli i praktyki edukacyjnej (do 1939 roku)*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
Janiczek, J. (1934). Na marginesie spraw ustrojowych w oświacie pozaszkolnej. *Wiedza i Życie*, *1*, 98–102.
Kopczewski W. (1920), *O szkołę polską. Pierwszy ogólnopolski wielki zjazd nauczycielski w dniach 14,15,16,17 kwietnia 1919 r. w Warszawie. Sprawozdanie i streszczenia*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
Korniłowicz, K. (1923). W sprawie ustawy o oświacie pozaszkolnej. *Oświata Pozaszkolna*, 4, 304.
Sutyła J. (1982), *Miejsce kształcenia dorosłych w systemie oświatowym II Rzeczypospolitej*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
Wydział Oświaty Pozaszkolnej. Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego. (1921). Od redakcji. *Oświata Pozaszkolna*, *1*(1-2), 1–4.
Wydział Oświaty Pozaszkolnej. Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego. (1923). Konferencja Oświatowa, *Oświata Pozaszkolna*, *4*, 337.
Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa Szkół Powszechnych. (1928). I Ogólnokrajowa konferencja oświaty pozaszkolnej, *Polska Oświata Pozaszkolna*, *1*, 319.
Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa Szkół Powszechnych. (1928). Memorjał Federacji Oświatowej Organizacyj Społecznych w sprawie ustawy o ustroju o ustroju szkolnictwa oraz w sprawie oświacie pozaszkolnej, *Polska Oświata Pozaszkolna*, *1*, 47–51.
Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa Szkół Powszechnych. (1928). Z ruchu oświatowego w Polsce, *Polska Oświata Pozaszkolna*, *1*, 52–68.
Związek Polskiego Nauczycielstwa Szkół Powszechnych. (1929). Kursy dla Dorosłych na terenie Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, *Polska Oświata Pozaszkolna*, *1*, 45–47.