

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY IN THE SECOND REPUBLIC OF POLAND. THE OUTLINE OF ISSUES

Aleksandra Siedlaczek-Szwed

Jan Dlugosz University in Czestochowa, Poland

***Abstract.** In an ethnically and culturally diversified society, great importance was assigned to education open to tolerance and respect for other people. In this respect, activities of Vilnius associations deserves special distinction, because – in spite of conflicts or differences of opinion – none of the associations propagated nationalist slogans nor promoted negative emotions. The dominating attitude was marked with moral sensitivity, connected with practical introduction of the pupils to perform their social and occupational ways, norms of conduct in compliance with the rules of amicable co-existence, their legacy and the sense of national identity in the spirit of tolerance.*

The fundamental objectives of the undertaken activities were: reconstructing reasons and circumstances of taking care of minor children, orphaned or deprived of appropriate care executed by their own families, determining the incentives contributing to development of tutelary ideas during the discussed period of time and revealing mechanisms causing development and extension of the activities, evaluating the welfare and educational work against the background of social needs, specification of the criteria to be satisfied by the institutions providing care to children in the environment of the Second Republic.

***Keywords:** care, charitable organisations, education, upbringing, Vilnius associations.*

Introduction

Regaining independence by the Polish state in 1918 year created foundations for a systematic and planned development of different forms of providing total and partial childcare. At the same time, there were many theoretical conceptions of bringing up children deprived of natural families developed, many new, more effective methods. Widespread discussions held in the society, supported by works of theoreticians of education, and their related practical solutions, inspired formation of Polish childcare system from scratch in the independent country. It was not an easy task, as after 125 years of bondage, the country and the society faced political, economic and ethnic difficulties in restoration and creation of the state.

The region of Vilnius was one of those Polish territories, where grassroots charity was particularly well developed. It had its own kind of tradition, based on the achievements and experience of the enlightened social classes and on aid and education programmes.

Polish initiatives in the field of taking care of children and adolescents were expressions of patriotic aspirations and at the same time were the result of the influence of the native tutelary conceptions combining tutelary activities with an educational programme. The associations formed by the national minorities did similar jobs, taking into account the values connected with the necessity to preserve the language, tradition, culture and religious creed that formed the basis of maintaining continuity of generations and national-cultural achievements.

Many research methods were applied in order to analyse the obtained results and their editorial processing. Due to the theoretical character of the work, the following methods were applied:

- historic-comparative – which was applied mainly for searching, selecting, classifying a problem and for identifying and comparing the collected material;
- monographic – used for examination of documents containing descriptions of the organizational structure;
- inductive – used mainly when revealing facts on the basis of source information, deciphered from instructions, programmes or other analysed documents;
- deductive – applied mainly when revealing facts on the grounds of documents indirectly discussing a given phenomenon;
- statistic.

The basic source base for this study were the archive records – an abundant set of records No 53: of the District Office of the City of Vilnius – the Republic of Poland, from the years 1921–1939, marked as Inventory No. 23, stored in the Lithuanian Central Archive in Vilnius and the Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, Records Section of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, Vilnius Association of Care for Children vol. 14, Performance Statement of Vilnius Association of Care for Children and Its Subordinate Institutions in the Years 1922-1933.

The fundamental objectives of the undertaken activities were: reconstructing reasons and circumstances of taking care of minor children, orphaned or deprived of appropriate care executed by their own families, determining the incentives contributing to development of tutelary ideas during the discussed period of time and revealing mechanisms causing development and extension of the activities, evaluating the welfare and educational work against the background of social needs, specification of the criteria to be satisfied by the institutions providing care to children in the environment of the Second Republic.

Educational activity in the Second Republic of Poland

The community of the Region of Vilnius was particularly sensitive to misery, particularly to the needs of children and adolescents. That attitude showed results not only in individual activity, dictated by an impulse of the heart, but also by a number of charity initiatives aimed at creating organisational frames for welfare and educational activities. One of such organisations was Vilnius Society for Providing Care for Children established in November 1901 on the initiative of social workers and philanthropists led by Jozef Montwiłł (Siedlaczek, 1998). Soon after it had been established, the Society extended its range of activity to Vilnius and Vilnius Region. The association continued its activities in the reborn Poland and considerably supplemented the activities of state and self-government institutions. The association acquitted a new formal and legal frames through an entry in the Register of Associations and Partnerships – entry No 1168 – in compliance with the resolution of the provincial governor of Vilnius of January 8, 1930.

Even in the early period of its activity, the association played an important role in keeping up Polish national awareness in the region of Vilnius and provided care to children coming from the poorest environments. By combining philanthropic activities with cultural and cultural-educational activities, the association took care of the poor children in the city of Vilnius, deprived of their parents, abandoned, threatened with bad influence of the environment in which they lived. After Poland regained its independence, the association extended its activities establishing welfare-educational institutions, in which children deprived of parental care found rational protection and education. A network of such institutions spread all over the Vilnius region. Cheap or free of charge day care centres, orphanages, food aid centres, children's hospitals and summer camp groups. The aim of such activities was to provide decent standards of living to the most needy and defenceless children. Intellectual, moral development and physical education were also taken care of, as they were very important for the adolescent generation. The association took care of the children, who were often victims of abuse, or were brought up in morally or financially bad conditions.

The ensuing situation induced to take up a widespread debate on finding a remedy for those problems and increase effectiveness of public initiatives and actions initiated by the state authorities. The issues were discussed at informal meetings, in many social circles, in open and parliamentary forums. Different concepts were devised and programmes created. In this way, a favourable atmosphere, favouring initiating welfare initiatives. And because stormy events that took place in the 20th century brought activities of many charitable institutions, deeply rooted in the previous century, to an end, the new conditions

forced creating new, more effective, tutelary-educational institutions. The problem took on not only a new social and political dimension, but first of all it required appealing to religious, moral and general human values. Hence the issues connected with providing social and educational support for children and adolescents was reflected in programmes of political parties and the daily media of different social and political orientation, as well as in pastoral work of the Roman-Catholic Church and other unions and associations of religious nature. While the right-wing parties treated the issue of social injustice or poverty with certain embarrassment, the left-wing parties used homelessness, diseases and unemployment of the young generation and tragic living conditions of the children for their propaganda and political purposes, trying to emphasize the hopelessness of life in the political system functioning in the inter-war Poland.

In the period under discussion, there were at least 40 associations (Siedlaczek-Szwed, 2009) in the studied area, Polish as well as those organised by ethnic and national minorities.

The association created tutelary and educational programmes for children and adolescents, as well as for adults. The basic group of the organisations, i.e. 22 (56.49%), originated the twenties, which were the years of particularly intensive assertion of appropriate childcare, when the entire Vilnius community set themselves the goal of setting up such a system of childcare and education, which would be appropriate to the existing needs and circumstances. The system was to provide optimal effectiveness of educational and tutelary activities oriented to values preparing children and adolescents for work and contribute to culture and to life with a sense of common good and idealistic human community. The premises resulted from the assumption that the values governing human existence and being part of the system of generally recognised axiological assessments are of fundamental importance in human life.

In that world, the world badly wounded with the effects of the war, the first ones to save were the direct foundations of existence exposed to orphanhood, hunger and epidemics. At the same time, encountering hardships of war and post-war realities had become sources of traumatic experiences and destroyed not only the financial sphere, but also the social ties based on cultural community and on the system of moral values. On that account, there was a tremendous social demand for such a pedagogical theory and educational system, which would have emphasised not so much the contents of education as values expressed as goals of education, pertaining to the entire sphere of human life (Pasterniak, 1991; Wolniewicz, 1993; Gołaszewska, 1990). Therefore, there is no doubt that the associations existing in the region of Vilnius put such pedagogy into practice in their activities with very good results. It had the same educational orientation in the associations established by the Polish community

(33 associations), as well as in the Jewish (3 associations) and the Byelorussian (2 associations) ones.

In the region of Vilnius, apart from all-Poland organizations – having their branches in the region – there were also organizations of local character, established in towns and settlements of the Vilnius region and implementing their statutory objectives there.

Further efforts to provide tutelary and educational services were made first of all by different public institutions and organisations, with relatively little help from the state. The administrative authorities, having relatively little money and budget resources, helped to finance only part of activities of the public organisations and organised care for children whose parents were killed in the war and for children of re-emigrants.

Care was provided first of all for orphaned, neglected and homeless children. They were placed in various tutelary centres or sent to peasant families. Activities connected with providing welfare aid to hungry and having nothing to live on children in large families, whose parents were poor and unemployed were initialised and developed. Aid was provided in the form of distribution of food rations, clothing, shoes and extra meals. There were also summer camps and summer play centres organised. Such activities were meant to prevent biological ravaging of young Polish generation.

However, universal, humanistic values motivating care providing activities were propagated side by side with values connected with such notions as nation, national culture, *raison d'état*. Ethnic and cultural diversification of Vilnius community and socio-political tensions arising on this ground made creation of a uniform system of care and education impossible. As a matter of fact, the universal nature of the idea of charity considerably toned down the tensions, but it should be noted that individual ethnic groups developed their aspirations separately – living in shared space, and forming separate religious, ethnic or cultural groups. Hence, apart from associations created by Polish community of the inhabitants of Vilnius, there were Jewish, Byelorussian (Orthodox Church) or Lithuanian associations formed. The style of the rescue activities of individual associations shows very clearly that it was the work performed and developed owing to specific people who, not only organisationally as well as financially, sometimes in a surprisingly generous way, rushed to other people's aid. Many societies could have organised schools, run hospitals, establish hostels, provide occupational training, facilitate membership of guilds, open orphanages and conduct extensive and original activity due to land and houses mortgage entries, as well as considerable financial contributions, which apart from limited financial support from the state budget was an important item in the annual balance sheet.

It should also be noted that in spite of the aforesaid diversification Vilnius associations enjoyed a high degree of public trust, as they were the response to the needs resulting from socio-economic, as well as cultural and political conditions. The associations owed their position to the fact that in the educational process they did not omit the spiritual sphere characteristic for individual milieus. Polish associations had distinct connections with Christian values, national aspirations and the legacy of Polish cultural tradition, whereas associations established by Jewish or Byelorussian communities aimed at preservation of their cultural and national identity, including preservation of tradition and religious principles that were faithfully followed by individual circles of Vilnius community.

In an ethnically and culturally diversified society, great importance was assigned to education open to tolerance and respect for other people. In this respect, activities of Vilnius associations deserves special distinction, because – in spite of conflicts or differences of opinion – none of the associations propagated nationalist slogans nor promoted negative emotions. The dominating attitude was marked with moral sensitivity, connected with practical introduction of the pupils to perform their social and occupational ways, norms of conduct in compliance with the rules of amicable co-existence, their legacy and the sense of national identity in the spirit of tolerance. In the region of Vilnius, where there were active and cooperating the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Church and Synagogue, building one's identity without tolerance might have been very dangerous. Therefore, the associations formed the tolerance by releasing cognitive activities of their members, based on referring to common experiences and historic ties.

Conclusion

When analysing educational programmes of individual associations, one can see – in spite of their common axiological plane – certain diversification in trends of activities. It often arises only from different emphasizing educational tasks, different ranking of the designated priorities. Hence, taking into account the fact that the essence of the educational objectives was common, not to say identical, it should be emphasized that classification of educational trends is in a certain way symbolic, determined by the emphasis rather than mutually exclusive differences. Yet, it is worthwhile to articulate this diversification of educational tasks, because it makes them more distinctive and their structure is more clear. Demands made in the sphere of pedagogical theories and the practice of pedagogical activities, expressed in statutes and programmes of activities of individual associations allow to distinguish four main trends in upbringing, characteristic for the interwar period, namely: national upbringing,

state upbringing and patriotic-civic upbringing, educational upbringing and socio-moral upbringing. All those trends in educational effects can be found in programmes and in practice of Vilnius associations and all-Poland organisations having their branches in the region of Vilnius.

Difficulties with development of childcare in Poland resulted from the negligence of the Partitioners' administration, the result of earlier policy, and not always appropriate social policy of the reborn Polish state and acute economic problems projecting not only on social situation, but on constant deficiency of budget revenues. For these reasons the tutelary units and institutions were not sufficiently subsidized and their expenses were permanently reduced. Programme concepts of associations included above all issues resulting from the exceptionally difficult contemporary situation of the time, as well as activities oriented on planning the future of a given individual realistically taking into account his or her identity.

Polish initiatives in the field of taking care of children and adolescents were expressions of patriotic and at the same time were the result of the influence of the native tutelary conceptions combining tutelary activities with an educational programme. The associations formed by the national minorities did similar jobs, taking into account the values connected with the necessity to preserve the language, tradition, culture and religious creed that formed the basis of maintaining continuity of generations and national-cultural achievements.

On the one hand, the work done by the associations was the work done in favour the Vilnius community, and on the other hand, which should be emphasized – it was the work of the same community, who recognised it as their moral obligation to carry out all sorts of charity services, such as: bringing up orphans and children from the poorest, as well as pathological families, educating of the jobless and quite often demoralised adolescents, providing aid to the sick and lonely.

The welfare organisations made efforts to resolve the most complicated educational problems, in accordance with the traditional ideal, derived from the national historical experience, which allowed Polish nation – but also the national minorities – to survive, even without their own, independent statehood. In their tutelary and educational practice, all the associations – Polish, Jewish and Orthodox – were motivated by the same objective: providing altruistic aid to children, adolescents and adults – lost, helpless in the face of challenges and threats carried by the complicated reality, in which they were unable to manage their own destiny. Carrying out the objective, they worked hard performing their ancillary welfare and educational function, whenever and wherever possible.

Many methods were used during the research; because the study is of historical and pedagogical nature, the following methods were used: historical method, comparative method, monographic method, inductive and deductive

methods. When comparing the most important events, facts corresponding to social conditions of the charity, welfare and educational activities during the inter-war period were emphasized.

References

- Gołaszewska, M. (1990). *Istota i istnienie wartości*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Pasterniak, W. (1991). *O dydaktycznej teorii wartości*. Goleniów: „Bios”.
- Siedlaczek, A. (1998). *Wileńskie Towarzystwo Opieki nad Dziećmi w latach 1901-1940*. Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej w Częstochowie.
- Siedlaczek-Szwed, A. (2009). *Działalność opiekuńcza towarzystw dobroczynnych na Wileńszczyźnie w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*. Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie.
- Wolniewicz, B. (1993). *Filozofia i wartości*. Warszawa: Wydział Filozofii i Socjologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.