

Jakub Siatka¹
Jagiellonian University
Cracow (Poland)

CHAPTER 31

POLISH EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC – SELECTED OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Abstract: The aim of this article was to show the opportunities and threats for Polish education strengthened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The method used was mainly document analysis. Firstly, the author briefly discussed the most important assumptions of the Polish education system (its most relevant legal conditions were presented). The problems that accompanied Polish schools before the peak of the epidemic wave were also presented. The main part of the article is based on an analysis of reports on the functioning of Polish education during the *lockdown* period. This study helps to reflect on the question of whether Polish policy-makers coped with the organisation of education during an unprecedented epidemic in the 21st century. The conclusions drawn at the end of the study (opportunities and threats) can be valuable for current and future political actors. Their practical application depends on the positioning of the role of education, political pragmatics and where they come from.

Keywords: *COVID-19, education policy, education in Poland, political decision-making, primary school, secondary school.*

1. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS AN EXTRAORDINARY PHENOMENON

During the course of everyday affairs, the COVID-19 pandemic fell on humanity from the sky (Turski 2020). With this somewhat literary introduction, it

¹ kuba.siatka@doctoral.uj.edu.pl; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1539-276X>

would be appropriate to begin these reflections. Just as in any extraordinary situation, it is particularly important to ensure the smooth operation of state organs, *eo ipso*, to protect the life and health of citizens. It is indisputable that the legislature and the executive play a key role in this regard. In such a vein, a hypothesis has been founded, which is that Polish policymakers have failed to cope with the new challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Stawicka & Stawicki 2020: 4).

In the context of the general comments, it should be noted that a mixed mode was chosen for the work of the Polish Sejm and Senate. For example, in the Senate, the first group of senators was present in the main chamber, another group sat in two other chambers, and the rest took part in the sitting and voting remotely. The entire Polish parliament made it a rule to fill in declarations regarding no contact with infected persons (Stawicka & Stawicki 2020: 8).

An important role is played by the law introduced. In such an extra-coordinated situation, different countries called the introduced states differently. For example, state of emergency - Czech Republic, Georgia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Portugal, Romania; state of health emergency - France; state of emergency - Spain; state of emergency - Estonia, Slovakia; state of crisis - Luxembourg; state of emergency - Hungary. An epidemic state was introduced in Poland (Stawicka & Stawicki 2020: 9). However, this is not the key topic for the purposes of this paper.

Looking from the perspective of 2023, even after the end of the epidemic state and the transition to an epidemic emergency, in the territory of the Republic, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted hitherto unknown problems, highlighted existing negligence, and accelerated the course of everyday life, further connecting people to the Internet. In early May 2023, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that COVID-19 “is no longer a global health emergency” (*COVID-19 outbreak status lifted. Epidemic emergency remains*, 2023).

Despite the optimistic scenario of the world authorities, it should be pointed out that the problem of the post-covid state and the need to build a new reality in the accelerated human existence is problematic and requires more prudence from political and social activists.

2. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND, LEGAL BASIS AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

The education system in Poland is part of the problem of issues related to the broader social policy of the state.

The term education from Latin means upbringing. Following Ryszard Szarfenberg (1998: 149), it can be assumed that “education is the process of passing on from

generation to generation the cultural heritage (knowledge, skills, value systems, etc.) of a particular community through a specific social institution such as a school”.

In Poland, this system can be divided into three main stages. These are education and upbringing: primary education (lasting 8 years), secondary education (giving the basis for a secondary school certificate; high school - 4 years, technical school - 5 years). At this stage, it is also possible to choose a branch education, which teaches an individual a specific profession. The last level is tertiary education (unified studies of 5 years or 3+2 years in the Bologna system). It should also not be forgotten that, according to the European Commission, two basic types of education are distinguished: formal education (formal education) and non-formal education (informal education) (Grzelak & Roszko-Wojtowicz 2017: 278).

In Poland, education is regulated by several legal acts. The most important legal act is, of course, the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997. Among its numerous articles, the most noteworthy is Article 70, which provides for free education. It follows from the first paragraph of this article that education is compulsory in Poland until the age of 18. The second paragraph testifies to the free education in public schools. It contains the provision that “The Act may allow for the provision of certain educational services by public higher education institutions for a fee”.

The implication of paragraph three is, firstly, that citizens and institutions can be free to choose schools other than public schools for their children, and secondly, that citizens and institutions have the right to establish primary, secondary and tertiary schools and educational establishments.

In the context of the equality aspect, the fourth paragraph of this article is important. Its provision prescribes equality and universality of education. In turn, paragraph five gives universities autonomy in their activities.

In terms of legal considerations, there are four pieces of legislation in force at the statutory level (this matter applies to primary and post-primary education, but not higher education).

These are as follows:

-Act of 7 September 1991 on the educational system³ - currently regulates, among other things, the system of external examinations, material aid for students (in part, in addition to the Act of 27 October 2017 on the financing of educational tasks), the principles of assessment, classification and promotion of students in public schools,

-Law of 14 December 2016 Education Law⁴. This is the most important legal act of pre-school and school education. It regulates, inter alia, the division and

² Constitution Republic of Poland, 1997, 70 [2].

³ Act of 7 September 1991 O systemie oświaty, Dz. U. 1991 no. 95 / 425 as amended.

⁴ Act of 14 December 2016 Prawo oświatowe, Dz. U. no. 2017 / 59 as amended.

types of schools and kindergartens existing in Poland, the principles of fulfilment of compulsory education, the management of public schools and institutions, the organisation of education, upbringing and care in public schools and institutions, the criteria for admission to institutions, the principles of operation of non-public schools and institutions, the conditions of operation of teacher training institutions,

- Act of 15 April 2011 on the educational information system⁵ - this act defines the principles of operation and use of the educational information system. Among other things, it serves to carry out the state's educational policy at the national, regional and local level, including support for education management, as well as for the effective functioning of the system of financing educational tasks at the national, regional and local level,

- Act of 26 January 1982 Teachers' Charter⁶. This legal act stipulates the rights and duties of teachers and has been amended several times. It essentially focuses on: the legal status of teachers, their pension, disability and social rights, rules of employment and dismissal. It regulates the way in which teachers' work is supervised and the rules for holding teachers liable for disciplinary action.

3. OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS FOR POLISH EDUCATION - ANALYSIS OF REPORTS

(a) *The report Education. Between the COVID-19 pandemic and the education of the future* (Czaplinski et al. 2020).

The report highlighted the problem of an ad hoc system of action. It accused decision-makers of opting for the traditional education method in the 2020/2021 school year. It pointed out that remote/hybrid learning was envisaged only in cases of clear increases in illness. According to Czaplinski et al. (2020: 17), the measures taken by authorised political actors "give the strong impression of a set of hastily assembled thoughts. Some are chaotic and piecemeal, while others are too general and rather obvious". In addition, the reporters blamed the then Ministry of Education and Science for not presenting a comprehensive plan of action in this case, not proposing the necessary schemes of action, nor presenting how to finance the imposed procedures.

An important point is that the cumulation of the problems caused by COVID-19 with the neglect present in the education system before the pandemic has been pointed out. According to the authors of the report, these are: hidden

⁵ Act of 15 April 2011 O systemie informacji oświatowej, Dz. U. 2011 no. 139 / 814 as amended.

⁶ Act of 26 January 1982 Karta Nauczyciela, Dz. U. 1982 no. 3 / 19 as amended,

inequalities, poor teacher preparation, a mismatch between education methodology and the needs of the modern world, and a lack of modern digital infrastructure. This last problem, in particular, has become apparent in the new digital reality. The real issue of the lack of IT support and the failure to modernise e-learning platform systems became a driving force for the lack of a viable and measurable learning system during the pandemic. It should be pointed out on this occasion that this problem is also described in communications on the Polish Ombudsman's website (*Coronavirus. Remote learning in schools - Ombudsman's submission to the MEN and MC 2020*).

The authors of the report revealed significant deficiencies at various levels. They listed, among others, the system-manager level, the social level, the substantive level, and the material level (Czaplinski et al. 2020: 20-21). At the first level, they pointed to the centralisation and rigidity of the system, which blocks flexible responses to unforeseen difficulties at the local level. At the same time, the inefficiency of central structures in providing support (e.g. sufficient e-books) was pointed out. Incompetent knowledge management, the absence of effective communication and information flow were highlighted. The effect of such deficiencies was that it was not known how many students actually participated in education, how many schools had infrastructure problems. At the social level, a lack of cooperation between key stakeholders (parents - children - teachers) was described. The isolation of schools was also perceived, together with strong pressure from educational authorities, parents and the public. The implementation of rigid core curriculum standards was preferred to the actual needs and development of students.

At the content level, the absence of modern methods of education, the unpreparedness of teachers for non-standard forms of work with students has become apparent. There is no doubt that the transmission model of knowledge transfer, combined with curriculum overload has become apparent. In the context of the quality of education, the overloading of students and teachers should be pointed out.

At the material level, insufficient infrastructure for online learning, social inequalities in access to education should be pointed out. The teachers conducting the classes had an unprovided workshop.

(b) *Report of the Minister of Education – “Ensuring the functioning of units of the educational system during the COVID-19 epidemic (2020)”*

The report is very comprehensive. It runs to almost 200 pages. It is worth pointing out that it already has a provision in the introduction stating that “Our decisions, as well as the subsequent arrangements concerning the way in which schools and educational institutions are to function and how other units of the educational system are to perform their tasks in the current school year were preceded by a comprehensive analysis of the situation at home and abroad” (*Report of the*

Minister of Education – Ensuring the functioning of units of the educational system during the COVID-19 epidemic 2020: 5).

The strength of the typescript is that it contains a lot of background information on the functioning of the education system during the pandemic. It is from this information that we learn that the period of suspension of teaching, educating and caring activities of units of the educational system lasted for less than 2 weeks (from 12 to 24 March). It was emphasised on this occasion that during this period, schools and teachers started to conduct distance learning. It was emphasised that as early as 20 March, the Minister of National Education issued regulations that created a legal framework for schools and educational establishments to systematically continue education using distance learning methods and techniques or in other ways agreed with the leading authority. It was also pointed out that, as of 25 March this year, distance learning was the main form of implementation by educational system units. Each school could use the Integrated Education Platform (*Integrated Education Platform of the Ministry of Education and Science*), made available by the Ministry of National Education, where teachers and students had access to over 6,800 free educational materials and secure functionalities enabling distance learning. The report learns that the Platform had more than 5.7 million user accounts. The digital data shows that the number of page views from 1 March 2020 to 15 June 2020 was more than 107 million. This averaged around 1 million page views per day. By 15 June 2020, more than 10 million users had used the platform and its resources.

On 30 March, a wide range of educational programmes were launched, which were prepared by Telewizja Polska S.A. in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education. The educational materials were aimed at pre-school children, pupils of individual primary school classes and secondary school students, including graduates preparing for the matriculation examination. The television lessons were broadcast from Monday to Friday on TVP - in accordance with the teaching plan set by the Ministry of National Education based on the current curriculum basis for general education. A total of 1,600 premiere lessons were prepared in the project.

Supporting materials distributed by the Ministry include 'Distance Learning. A guide for schools', 'Personal data safe during distance learning'. The first of these was published on 25 March. It contained specific recommendations on the organisation of education using distance learning methods and techniques, addressed to school principals, teachers, students and parents, provisions on the protection of personal data. The brochure for schools entitled 'Personal data safe during remote teaching', published on 31 March, included information on securing data by using appropriate technical and organisational measures, safe use of remote working tools, and protection of external storage media. The Office for the Protection of Personal Data has also developed 20 security principles that school administrators,

teachers, as well as students should use during remote learning to best protect their data. Among them are hints on passwords, software, securing files, wireless networks or portable drives. These are universal tips that can also be useful in other areas of life and are worth bearing in mind on a daily basis (*Report of the Minister of National Education - Ensuring the functioning of educational system units during the COVID-19 epidemic 2020: 29-33*).

(c) “Functioning of schools in a COVID-19 emergency” - *report of the Supreme Audit Office*

The report emphasises that the epidemic has strongly highlighted the inadequacies of the education system. Those responsible for compiling the report pointed out the problem with social communication, the inadequacy of the core curriculum to adapt to online reality. It also points out that Poland lacks modern teaching methods and teachers lack key competences. It pointed out that remote education was detrimental to the education and upbringing of young people. The report alleged that in the 2020/2021 school year, no new opportunities were created to counteract the effects of COVID-19 (systemic solutions aimed at ensuring optimal conditions for education).

The “Remote School” and “Remote School+” programmes deserve approval. According to analysts, these are good examples of combating the pandemic. In addition, they have been noted for their development potential, reducing the level of digital exclusion. A traditional barrier, familiar in the Polish reality, was underfunding. The audit showed that the equipment purchased in the inspected facilities accounted for 16% of the declared demand.

As a general rule, the NIK report showed that the schools were carrying out the activities necessary to fulfil the normally prescribed teaching tasks. In addition, it was pointed out that the principals of the inspected schools - despite frequent legislative changes - managed to cope with the difficulties.

Among the negative examples allowed by policy makers, it was condoned not to write absences for pupils - which was against the law.

In the context of legislation, it should be pointed out that, according to legal doctrine, there is a systematic indication of an overgrowth of legal acts in Poland with no increase in the quality and certainty of the law. The same was the case in this situation. As many as fifty-eight regulations and two orders of the minister responsible for education, one resolution and one regulation of the Council of Ministers were issued.

The report also reveals the fact that the mental condition of teachers has deteriorated. According to the inspectors, the problem here is the curriculum mismatch and the lack of uniform teaching standards.

It should also be pointed out that in this extra-coordinated situation teachers were obliged to implement the entire core curriculum. There were no changes in this respect.

The Supreme Audit Office's 2019/2020 research revealed that more than one in ten teachers declared that the adopted curricula were incomplete or missing during their inspections.

4. OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS FOR POLISH EDUCATION - SELECTED PROPOSALS

Analysing the above issues, it can be concluded that the COVID-19 state period has brought to light several positive issues that should be looked at in the context of policy-making in extra-coordination situations. First and foremost, it is important to highlight the fact that continuity of education was ensured even at a very basic level. A correlated issue with this is that the level of digital exclusion has been reduced. By organising activities via TV and radio, not only was the un-interruptibility of learning ensured, but optional means of action were also relied upon. Among the plus points, the building of alternative activities - e.g. TV theatre, forms of play - should be mentioned. It should definitely be highlighted that the online learning time prompted more creative planning of activities.

Among the threats to the education system, reinforced by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, one must first point out the deepening mismatch of the core curriculum. This is an important issue. Certainly a negative indication of the level of knowledge of political decision-making in extra-coordinated situations. Secondly, the remote learning system allowed for shortcomings in the control of student attendance. The epidemic state reinforced social isolation and resulted in students failing to build interpersonal relationships or form friendships. In the analysis of emerging social barriers, the issue of the child's lack of experience of public space (social closure, inadequate socialisation) emerged. In the context of detailing further problems brought about by the pandemic is the existence of differences in curricula at the same level (level of education). An important issue is the lack of sufficient teacher competence to fully digitise learning.

5. CONCLUSION

With a view to answering the research hypothesis that Polish policy-makers have failed to deal with the new challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the answer is not clear-cut. Those carrying out the analysis in the reports in question have placed emphasis on different issues. One can certainly see more

criticism of policy-makers from the bottom-up report and the one prepared by the Supreme Chamber of Control than from the Polish ministry responsible for education. What can also be seen with certainty is that the pandemic has clearly demonstrated the neglect and problems of Polish education that have so far been apparent. This aspect is not in any doubt. What is debatable is whether the decision-makers acted with due diligence and adapted their actions to the state of emergency. On the one hand, the continuity of education was ensured, but its level was much lower. In the context of decision-making, too much legislation should be pointed out. On occasion, the law was not always applied. This synthesises to a negative opinion. On the other hand, in view of the *fact* that the situation was so exceptional *de facto for the first time* since the well-known times of the Second World War, one should not hastily, merely negatively criticise those responsible for the actions taken. In the opinion of the author of the present study, such a hypothesis is not possible to verify unequivocally, although *par excellence* it is closer to a negative opinion by the fact of numerous difficulties and a decline in the level of education - so crucial for the education and upbringing of Polish youth.

In doing so, it is to be hoped that in the case of subsequent extra-coordinate states, policymakers will be able to learn the lessons of history from the COVID-19 outbreak.

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