

SUMMARY

Primary sources for the history of education in Poland in the 20th century

School reports • minutes of teachers' board meetings • school annals

In order to be able to gain an insight into the history of a school or any other educational institution, it is necessary to refer to sources, which provide help in preparing, for instance, a monograph. The spectrum of source material that any researcher dealing with the history of education (be it professionally or as an amateur) has at their disposal is extremely wide. With such an abundance at hand, it is easy to lose your way, and therefore it is necessary not only to go into quantitative but also qualitative analysis, both of which are supported by a very insightful analysis. An interesting classification of sources for the history of schools and education understood in the broader sense has been designed by Urszula Wróblewska. Within the plethora of sources, there are three that seem to deserve particular attention. These are school reports, the minutes of teachers' board meetings and school annals.

The first type was already known in the early modern period, but they became firmly established in the schools of Polish Galicia and Prussia in the 19th century. After Poland regained its independence in 1918, issuing school reports became common practice in Polish schools and also parts of the territory formerly under Russian rule. The outbreak of the Second World War marked the end of issuing school reports and this practice was not restored after the war. As late as the 1960s there were still recommendations among academics to bring this practice back into use, also with the view to engaging teachers in academic research. School reports were usually composed of two parts. The former was an academic piece, usually written by one of the teachers. The latter, which was referred to as 'administrative', included a list of teachers along with the subjects they taught. It also contained a list of coursebooks, titles of school papers and MA exam topics. One of the most interesting sections of this part was called the "annals of the unit".

The summary of the activity of school organisations and extracurricular clubs was also equally interesting. At the end of the school report, a list of the school's graduates was presented and also a list of all the pupils attending in a particular school year, arranged according to their school results. The analysis of this type of source can be conducted on a variety of levels. For instance, it is possible to compare the activity of a particular school with other schools nationwide. Another way of analysing the reports is to focus on all from a particular locality or administrative unit and in this way present the history of education within a particular territory.

The minutes of teachers' board meetings are another important and interesting type of source. Their unique character lies in the fact that they constitute the only source providing information about difficult issues, such as problems with pupils' disruptive behaviour and conflicts between pupils or teachers. Like school reports, the minutes provide extensive information on the school's teaching staff, i.e. personnel changes, duty allocation, supervision of school organisations, and finally, the impact that the social and political situation had on the transformation of the educational ideal, the latter being of particular importance in communist Poland.

The minutes of teachers' board meetings also provide information on the organisations that operated within schools, such as the Polish Scouting Association, School Savings Bank, Air and Gas Defence League, and after the Second World War, the Polish-Soviet Friendship Society. The minutes also provide information on extracurricular clubs. The disadvantage of these documents is that they are scattered and usually contained in the schools' archives. As a result, access to them is limited, as school heads, often using confidentiality as an excuse, tend to refuse access to the files, a practice that is against the law. The GDPR rules recently introduced in Poland have been used as an additional argument for school heads' refusal to allow access to the files.

The last and most useful source of common access is the schools' annals. The exact point in time when the annals started being recorded remains unknown, but the first instructions on the technicalities and their substantive content emerged as early as 1916. The interwar period witnessed the publication of several such documents, and this was also the case after the Second World War. School annals are subjective, because their accessibility to all determines their mainly positive tone when describing the schools' activities. When setting out to write a particular school monograph, its annals are the most accessible source.

They are a source providing information on the teaching staff, but probably the most frequently covered issue is that of school special celebrations, which in numerous cases were determined by the social and political situation at the time. The other issues covered are school competitions, excursions and numerous events as part of the school's activities. When comparing the school annals written at the beginning of the 20th century with those published at present, a certain important difference can be discerned. The growing accessibility of cameras has meant that at some point photographs became the predominant element. They are usually not accompanied by a caption and tend to dominate the content, which in turn makes the annals difficult to use as sources. It is important to mention at this point that apart from the school annals, there are also the annals of particular classes and schools organisations, scout groups, the Polish Red Cross associations, etc. It is from the school annals that any researcher starts out when trying to write a monograph devoted to a particular school or any other educational institution.

Translated by Rob Pagett