



***Implementation of Autonomy
in Non-Public Schools after 1989.
The Perspective of Founders and Directors
Implementacja autonomii
w szkołach niepublicznych po roku 1989.
Perspektywa założycieli i dyrektorów***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aims of the article are of three types: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. The exploratory aim includes striving to identify the basic facts related to the implementation of autonomy in non-public schools after 1989; the descriptive purpose includes an attempt to document the process of autonomy in non-public schools, and the explanatory objective includes developing and enriching theoretical explanations.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: In relation to the subject matter, the research question is: how did the process of implementing autonomy in non-public schools develop? The research used a qualitative strategy, and the tool used during the research was an interview with the founders and principals of Polish non-public schools.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: Non-public schools were being established in Poland after 1989 as a result of the political transformation. They were perceived as modern grassroots forms of education based on humanistic, democratic values. Autonomy was to be a tool and help in the fulfilment of those values and ideas.

RESEARCH RESULTS: In non-public schools, autonomy was a gradual process. To a large extent, the scope of autonomy and participation in decision-making processes first of all depended on the management units, such as the principal and the governing authority.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: For the founders and principals of schools, autonomy in Polish non-public schools was an important element in building the school community, although it was carried out by trial and error because there were no available models for implementing autonomy. In future, it would be worthwhile to undertake empirical research of

Polish public schools in the field of exercising autonomy, and then to carry out comparative research in this area.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATION, AUTONOMY, SCHOOLS,
NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CHANGES**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Cele artykułu są trojakiemu rodzaju: eksploracyjny, opisowy oraz wyjaśniający. Eksploracyjny – dążenie do rozpoznania podstawowych faktów związanych z implementacją autonomii w szkołach niepublicznych po roku 1989, cel opisowy – próba udokumentowania procesu autonomii w szkołach niepublicznych oraz wyjaśniający – wypracowanie i wzbogacanie wyjaśnień teoretycznych.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: W związku z podjętą tematyką pytanie badawcze brzmi: Jak przebiegał proces wdrażania autonomii w szkołach niepublicznych? W badaniach zastosowano strategię jakościową, a narzędziem wykorzystanym podczas badań był wywiad przeprowadzony z założycielami i dyrektorami polskich szkół niepublicznych.

PROCES WYWODU: Niepubliczne szkoły dynamicznie powstawały w Polsce po 1989 r. za przyczyną transformacji ustrojowej. Były one postrzegane jako nowoczesne formy tworzone oddolnie przez obywateli, oparte na humanistycznych, demokratycznych wartościach. Autonomia miała być narzędziem i pomocą w realizacji tych wartości, urzeczywistnieniem tych idei.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Autonomia w szkołach niepublicznych była stopniowym procesem. W dużej mierze zakres autonomii, partycypacja w procesach decyzyjnych zależały w pierwszej kolejności od organów zarządzających: dyrekcji oraz organu prowadzącego.

WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE: Autonomia w polskich szkołach niepublicznych była dla założycieli i dyrektorów szkół istotnym elementem budowania wspólnoty szkolnej, choć realizowano ją metodą prób i błędów, ponieważ nie było dostępnych wzorców implementacji autonomii. Warto byłoby podjąć w przyszłości badania empiryczne w odniesieniu do polskich szkół publicznych w zakresie realizowania autonomii, a w dalszej kolejności przeprowadzić badania komparatystyczne w tym zakresie.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **AUTONOMIA, ZARZĄDZANIE W EDUKACJI, SZKOŁY,
SZKOŁY NIEPUBLICZNE, ZMIANY**

Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the organisational development of non-public schools after 1989 in terms of autonomy, from the perspective of their creators and principals. The specific objectives include an exploratory, descriptive and explanatory objective. The

exploratory objective aims at identifying the basic facts related to the implementation of autonomy in non-public schools after 1989. The descriptive objective includes the attempt to document the process of autonomy in non-public schools, and the explanatory objective includes developing and enriching theoretical explanations. Hence, the question arises: how did the process of implementing autonomy in non-public schools develop? There are studies on teacher autonomy in literature, but there has been a lack of research on autonomy from the perspective of school founders and principals on whom its scope largely depended. This article fills this cognitive gap in relation to the undoubtedly complex phenomenon of autonomy fulfilled in educational organisations.

Research methods and tools

A qualitative approach was used in the research. The data collection method included a partially categorised interview. It was conducted with founders and/or co-founders of non-public schools, and with their principals. The purpose of using this tool was to obtain data on autonomy in the early days of non-public schools. The questions were related to all in-school educational entities. The research tool consisted of three parts. The first part dealt with the autonomy of the actions taken by the educational entities; the second part referred to the participation of those entities in decision-making processes; and the third one dealt with the distribution of management competences. The qualitative research was conducted in schools which were purposively selected. Thirty interviews were collected in 10 primary and secondary schools, which were located in Kraków and established from 1989 to 2005. The entities setting up and running the schools were non-governmental organisations, such as associations, foundations and partnerships.

The main part

Education in the People's Republic of Poland was subject to politics and ideology. An example of the servility of education to ideology and the political party was the introduction, in 1950, of the school curricula based on the following assumptions:

[...] to base all teaching contents on the Leninist-Marxist method in an atmosphere of total devotion to the cause of socialism [...]; to link the contents taught at schools with political life; to introduce the subject of the Soviet Union [...] as an example and model for our [Polish] nation; to show, based on scientific material, the class basis for the division of the world into the camp of imperialism, backwardness and war, versus the camp of socialism, progress and peace (Fik, 1989, p. 143).

In 1972, the *Report on the Status of Education in the People's Republic of Poland* assessed the school system negatively. The authors of the report emphasized, inter

alia: the lack of a uniform school policy resulting from the subordination of education to a number of ministries and central offices; the fact that the management style of the school system was characterised by excessive authoritarianism, as well as the overload of regulations and their high variability; the unclear division of competences between central and local authorities; the employment of persons with inadequate qualifications as directors, inspectors and supervisors; the infrastructure which resembled that of factories and was unsuitable for schools; the lack of staff with higher education; inadequate curricula, as well as the inadequacy and one-sidedness of didactic means, methods and forms of work (*Raport o stanie oświaty w PRL*, 1973). The instructional and prescriptive style of school management in the communist Poland, which was based on centralisation, the lack of autonomy of school entities and poor socialisation of schools reinforced the social structure in which one-way transmission constituted a monologic space. This was exemplified by the teacher-student relationship and the educational process determined by it: the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and is there to think, while the students do not know and have no right to think; the teacher speaks and the students humbly listen; the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined; the teacher makes a choice and the students are expected to respect that choice; the teacher acts and the student has the illusion of acting; the teacher is the subject and the student is the object of the process of education (Freire, 2005).

The opportunity to change the way schools were managed appeared with the political transformation and the introduction of the democratic order. The opportunity to establish non-public schools after 1989 made it possible to build organisations open to dialogue from scratch. Such organisations were to give the members of the school community the opportunity to use their own voice, express their own vision of the world, pursue truths, and create meeting places for dialogue. A tool that helped people build schools based on a dialogue was autonomy.

The term autonomy comes from the Greek *autónomos* (*autós* – self, *nomós* – law, principle, custom), i.e. self-governed or independent. Depending on the scientific discipline, researchers define the concept of autonomy in different ways. In philosophy, autonomy refers to morality (Didier, 1992, p. 27). In psychology it means self-control, independence and being inner-directed (Reber & Reber, 2006, p. 68). In pedagogy, autonomy is independence in educational activity and the condition of the students' maturity (Kupisiewicz & Kupisiewicz, 2009, p. 15). Representatives of legal sciences, such as L. Sohn (1980, p. 180-190) and F. Harhoff (1986, p. 31), define autonomy as something between the independent state and the subject or subordinated unit.

According to K. Kiciński (1992), autonomy of an individual is manifested in several forms:

- mental autonomy – respecting individual beliefs on what is good for him/her;
- legal autonomy – respecting others' right to their own beliefs and views,
- social autonomy – deciding about oneself, taking into account the behaviour and life in different scopes of one's competences.

It is widely accepted that autonomy is a condition in which the subject can decide independently on the articulation and implementation of concepts, ideas and actions (Motloba, 2018, p. 418).

The above-mentioned definitions indicate the complexity of the concept of autonomy. Nevertheless, the autonomy of a person, along with consciousness and freedom, "is not given to a man in a ready-made and immutable form, but it is rather provided to him as a task, and thus, to the same extent as the totality of human being, bears the mark of potentiality; it is shaped and specified in action" (Krapiec, 1991, p. 301). Autonomy is a feature of an individual, but it must be seen as a value and in a relational, process aspect (Nedelsky, 1989; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Therefore, regardless of the form, dimension and way of defining autonomy, one has to work on its existence and fulfilment. Depending on the external conditions, autonomy is something one has to work out.

In turn, the model suggested by R. Lapidoth divides definitions of autonomy into four categories. The first group refers to autonomy as the right to act freely to some extent. The second one is related to independence. The third one identifies autonomy with decentralisation. The fourth group refers to the autonomous community's possession of legislative, administrative and judicial rights (Lapidoth, 1997, p. 33). Autonomy refers both to a person and to an organisation. This is reflected in the school models identified by R. Otręba (2012, p. 132):

- administered school in which the only decision-maker is the state;
- partially autonomous school: the state determines the tasks, and the school principal has strictly specified authorities given by the state government;
- partially autonomous school directed in a collegial manner: the state specifies the school's frame of actions, and the staff are the decision-makers;
- partially autonomous school directed in a democratic manner: educational authorities specify the school's frame of actions, and the teachers are the decision-makers.

Thus, schools can be completely centralised, relatively centralised or completely autonomous, which hardly ever occurs.

Autonomy can apply to all areas constituting the school organisation: the pedagogical area (teaching contents, forms, means, working methods, ways of assessing pupils); the personal area (people in the organisation, staff); the financial area (resources and means of the organisation); the organisational area (processes improving school management, organisation of work); and the evaluative area (Smolański, 1987).

In a school organisation there are several educational entities: the principal, teachers, children, parents, and the governing body. M. Frostenson (2015), an economist, points out the three-dimensionality of autonomy in relation to education. The first dimension is the professional one, and it is characteristic of the group of teachers as a professional group. The second dimension refers to the autonomy of the school organisation: the principal and the teaching staff. The third dimension is the individual dimension that includes the individual teacher. Also, Frostenson sees school as a complex social system in which the autonomy of the individual and/or the group influences the autonomy of others. The educational subject who plays one of the key roles at school is the teacher. The teacher's

autonomy means self-reliance in thinking and independence in taking actions, provided that the freedom of other individuals is not violated (Śliwerski, 1998, p. 112). The teacher has the right to make innovative educational decisions, to independently plan, organise, control and evaluate his work with the students (Radziewicz, 1993, p. 1-2). Moreover, the teacher's autonomy is two-dimensional. The first dimension is related to the professional role and concerns involvement in the process of changes, i. e. the creation of an educational environment that meets the children's needs. The second dimension is personal, and in this dimension autonomy enables personal development, professional improvement and subjectivity; and it requires critical thinking, reflectiveness, creativity, dialogue and cooperation (Popławska, 2021). In the parallel manner, we can define the autonomy of the principal, the supervisory body or the parents. H. Holec (1981, p. 3, as cited in Dislen, 2011) defines the student's autonomy as the ability to take control of one's own learning, adding that students have the ability to make all decisions related to learning. At this point, it is worth mentioning the factors that limit autonomy. They can be divided into external and personal-internal ones. External factors include: regulations of governmental authorities, regulations of a given school (Wysocka, 2008, p. 16-17), the school principal's management style, as well as factors of a historical and cultural nature. Personal-internal factors include the teachers' attitudes and beliefs.

Results of the academic analysis

The qualitative research was conducted in schools, two of which were run by limited liability companies, three by school foundations, four by associations, and one by a church authority. Autonomy processes in the organisations studied proceeded in different ways, depending on the adopted school management style: autocratic, democratic and mixed.

Internal autonomy depends, to a large extent, on the school managers who constitute such autonomy. Autonomy makes it possible for school entities to participate directly in the life of the school. In the interviews that were carried out, the founders and principals of non-public schools talked about taking autonomous action by educational entities, about the division of competences in management, and about the participation of school entities in decision-making processes in the first years of existence of the non-public schools.

The overarching aim of the founders of most non-public schools was to build a school community and to foster in individuals a sense of being full members of it. Accordingly, educational entities were given autonomy, albeit uneven. An important, though secondary, objective set by the founders and principals of non-public schools, were didactic and educational outcomes, and the promotion of creative initiatives. School management was the most marginalized among the goals set in non-public schools.

Educational entities made use of the possibility to implement autonomous activities to a different extent and in different areas. In the first years of the existence of non-public schools, independent activities were most often undertaken by the principal and the

governing body. Although both of these entities carried out autonomous activities in each of the areas of the school (administrative and organisational issues, didactic-educational area, financial issues, cooperation with the environment), there was a clear division. The principal acted autonomously mainly in the administrative/organisational field and in the cooperation with the external environment, while the governing body was responsible for finances. In the case of teachers, autonomous activities included the didactic and educational area, as well as the cooperation with various institutions and organisations. It is worth emphasizing that independent activities of the teaching staff rarely concerned the administrative or organisational sphere. Also, teachers never ever initiated activities related to finances. Among the educational entities, parents were a group that quite often initiated actions related to the local environment and also to the education of children. In turn, the occasional use of autonomy by the students concerned the didactic and educational area.

A manifestation of intra-organisational autonomy is the distribution of management competences among different entities. In the early years of non-public schools it was the principal (in other school organisations – the principal together with the governing body) who had the greatest management authority. The principal was followed by the teachers, and then by the parents. According to the majority of the respondents, the distribution of management powers was appropriate. Few respondents would extend the catalogue of powers given to the principal, or to the governing body and the principal.

The founders and principals of non-public schools indicated some of the reasons why there is no need to increase the management powers for students, parents or administration. As one of the respondents stated: *“I, as the principal, bear a one-person responsibility, including the legal one, for the school, which is why I cannot share my power”* [S3-2012]. There was also a response critical of the parents: *“The parents had too much influence, while they had no idea about management”* [P1-2013]. Some respondents oppose the delegation of power because they believe that the experience of other schools in this regard has not been successful.

Participation in the decision-making process contributes to making a person the subject, and it calls employees to feel responsible for the organisation's actions. At the same time, it can enable the employee's self-fulfilment. The employee can personally, independently, and to varying degrees, influence the organisational world, and he/she can create this world. In the research undertaken, a number of management-relevant issues were detailed, namely planning the school's development directions, determining the school's financial arrangements, organising and controlling the school's activities, selecting educational methods, selecting teaching resources, as well as selecting educational content and ways of controlling and assessing students.

In most of the non-public schools, the principal and the governing authority decided about planning the directions of the schools' development. Teachers and parents could also participate in the decision-making process. Pupils were excluded from this process in some schools, but in other organisations they participated in it through consultations or co-deciding.

In the early years of the existence of non-public schools, the governing body usually made all the decisions related to financial matters, while the principal participated in the decision-making process. Teachers were informed, asked about their opinions, or not involved in the process. In some schools, other entities were excluded from this decision-making process, while in a few schools parents were informed about financial issues or asked about their opinion on them.

Organising the activities of non-public schools mainly involved the principal, the governing body, teachers and parents. They were involved in co-deciding on these matters. The students were usually not involved in such decisions. The students hardly ever played the role of consultants or co-decision-makers, or received information on organisational matters.

In most schools, the decisions on supervisory activities were made by the principal and the governing body. There were exceptions when the principal was consulted and the governing body made the decision, or the principal made the decision and the governing body was not involved in the process. Parents or teachers hardly ever co-determined the supervision in schools. It was more common for parents to receive information about the inspection activities to which the school was to be subjected. The students were not involved in such decisions.

In all schools, people who decided or co-decided about the teaching methods were the teachers and the principal. Usually, the choice of educational methods was not determined by the governing body. The students were not involved in making such decisions. In some schools educational methods were consulted with the parents, while in other schools the parents were not involved in the process.

The decisions on teaching resources were made by the principal and the teachers. The governing body co-decided, decided or consulted the schools on the selection of teaching resources. The parents and students were generally not involved in the selection of teaching resources.

In almost all schools, the educational contents were selected or co-selected by the teachers and the principal. The governing body was mostly only consulted or not involved in such decisions. The students were mostly not involved in such decision-making processes. According to the interviewees, the schools hardly ever provided them with information on the subject or allowed them to co-determine the educational contents. Depending on the school, the parents were either informed and/or consulted, or did not participate in the decision-making process, with the exception of the school run by a faith-based organisation in which the parents were co-decision makers on the educational contents.

The assessment of students in all schools was decided by the teachers. The principals also participated in making such decisions. Only in one of the schools the principals did not participate in the decision-making process. The governing body usually did not participate in such decisions, and it was rarely asked for the opinion or informed about these matters. The students and the parents were either informed or excluded from the decision-making process.

Conclusions

A key change for the founders of non-public schools was autonomy. The starting point was to create the proper organisational culture. It was to be built, in the first instance, by creating a school community based on subjectivity and equality. The management style adopted in non-public schools allowed for the implementation of autonomous activities. Initially, autonomy expressed through independent actions mainly concerned the school authorities; then, it also concerned the teachers and the students. Autonomous actions were mainly taken up in the typical areas of activity of particular educational entities.

The concept of exercising power was based on the participation of school entities in certain decision-making processes. Decisions on the organisation management, and on financial and supervisory matters, were mainly made by the principal and the governing body. These two entities, with the participation of the teachers and the parents, co-determined the planning and organisation of school activities. The students were generally not involved in decisions concerning the management of the organisation.

From the very beginning of the existence of non-public schools, it was obvious to their founders that decisions concerning the education of students were to be made by the teachers and the principal. The governing body did not play a significant role in making decisions related to the management of the education process. Parents usually played the role of consultants, or were informed about such issues.

Autonomy in non-public schools was a gradual process, and its extent depended on the type of the educational entity. It was also regulated by the school authorities, for example by allowing the participation of some educational entities in particular areas of the school's activity or in certain decision-making processes, which confirms that it mainly depended on the principal and the governing authority. On the other hand, the commitment and attitude of teachers and students in exercising their autonomy was also important. Autonomy in non-public schools was progressive, especially in case of teachers and students. It was a tool used by the school authorities to fulfil the task they had established themselves, i. e. building the school community

It should be emphasized that different models of school management appeared in non-public schools. The typical model, which was the most popular in the schools surveyed, was the autonomous school with a leader open to the initiatives of the school community (mixed management style) and two extreme models: 1) an autonomous school with strong centralised leadership (authoritarian management style), and 2) a democratically managed school with leadership dispersed throughout the school community (democratic management style). It is worth mentioning that non-public schools introduced their process of autonomy by trial and error, as no suggestions for its implementation were available at that time.

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